



ADVENTURES IN HORRORLAND

**A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
WRITTEN BY
SUZIE LOCKHART & BRUCE LOCKHART 2ND**



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First Edition

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ISBN: 978-1-291-56538-6

FOREWORD

Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2ND are a mother and son team of authors from Pennsylvania, USA.

Our paths first crossed when I was starting out on my own journey and submitted a piece for their consideration, as associate editors for Dark Moon Books. Little did I know of the trip we would all be taking together, to Horrorland and beyond...

After reading their own chilling tales in the form of *Ten to Midnight* and *Death's Final Request* (included in this collection) I realized that their unique partnership made for some truly unique and terrifying stories. Later they became guest editors for my own label (Horried Press), and are currently engaged in editing their second anthology for me as I write this – *Nightmare Stalkers & Dream Walkers: volume II*.

When picking people to work with I have several criteria those people must adhere to:

They must be honest, hardworking, good people with a love of the genre. They must have extraordinary skills within the literature field and be able to understand people. Suzie and Bruce measure up on all of those points, and more, which is why I think their own fiction is so eloquently written. To understand people is to understand human interactions and be able to use that when creating your own characters for a piece, so Horrorland for Suzie & Bruce was never going to be too far away...

Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd had not started out writing horror. It was the Horror Community that embraced *them*. Not only did they discover they had a knack for tales of the macabre but also found a home – a family, of sorts. As such, the title of their collection embraces their journey as developing horror writers.

This collection of eerie tales is a nice balance of both the grisly and the macabre, bringing its readers on a no-holds-barred thrill-ride of seemingly never-ending terror.

So step right up, experience the dark show of a lifetime, as we pay the fair and enter through its blackened, creaky gates. And for those of you now nervously clutching this terrifying volume in your hands... the horror show is about to begin...

– Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

Editor-in-chief

Horried Press

WELCOME TO HORRORLAND

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HORRORLAND

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd & Suzie Lockhart

“Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end, then stop.” - Lewis Carroll

Alice could feel the anticipation buzzing around her like a current of electricity as the large crowd waited for the looming, wrought iron gates to open. There had never been an amusement park anywhere near their little Alaskan town. Coveted tickets were clutched tightly in everyone's hands, allowing them to ride for free opening night. Her parents had gone on and on about the generosity of the owner.

People were scattered all around the big parking area, the atmosphere festive as if it were a tailgating party. Alice and her folks had arrived early that morning, in order to be among the first to enter. As they awaited the big event, she pressed her nose against two of the cold metal spokes, trying to peer through the trees in order to get a peek at the attractions that had been concealed all day. Lights popped on, and she could just make out a statue of a dark, slithery monster illuminated in the twilight.

Entry of the Gladiators blared suddenly through the loudspeakers. Alice knew what the typical circus tune was called because she studied piano after school three days a week. The music gave off an eerie ambiance as it echoed through the park. An array of sweet smelling fair food assaulted Alice's senses. Just beneath the surface, Alice thought she caught a whiff of a faint smell that reminded her of...bacon.

How odd.

Overhead, the sky as the curtain of nightfall descended. The heavy looking chains that had been holding together the weathered iron gates began to rattle, just as the music suddenly stopped.

Smoke rose mysteriously from the ground, seeping through the gates as they began to creak open. A lone figure bathed in shadows was walking slowly towards the anxious spectators. As he came into view, Alice saw he was dressed flamboyantly in a crushed velvet, lavender suit, complete with a striped vest. A top hat covered most of his white hair. He used his brass

walking stick as assistance when he climbed onto a podium in the center of the entrance.

He bowed low to the audience before pulling a lighter from his pocket. He lit the top of the cane as though it was a torch, letting the flames dance across his skeletal features. A golden spider, pinned to his chest pocket, shimmered as it was illuminated by the fire.

“Let us in already!” A young boy in a red shirt shouted at him. The voice seemed to come from far away; Alice couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from the glowing spider.

When she finally looked up, the ringmaster was smiling coldly at the boy, a glint in his pearly white teeth. Then his eyes met Alice’s, and she shivered, for it was as though he was staring straight into her soul. She wrapped her arms around herself as he began reciting some sort of mantra, his booming voice hypnotic as it quieted the agitated crowd.

*“Come one, come all!
Out of the darkness into the light of my flame.
Once you’re inside
You’ll find my park is anything but a game.
‘Twas you who made the choice,
To step through this door, to open this page.
Unless free will is a gimmick,
And you’re all just rats in a cage.
Caged by what? You ask.
Well, now, by your own fear of course.
Eventually you’ll be set free again,
Be it for better, or for worse.
My tickets you do covet,
So strap in for the ride.
We all are scared of something,
Time to swallow that pride.
Soon you will embrace your fear,
For it is your fear, alone
Cold and numbness shall set in,
Leaving you drenched to the bone.
Now sign the waiver and take a deep breath,*

*You see, terror is our brand
So enter at your own risk,
As you step into HorrorLand.”*

With that, the ringmaster tossed Alice a bouquet of black roses. She caught them, and they pricked her finger as the crowd moved hypnotically past into the park.

“Mom, Dad!” She grabbed at her parents, but couldn’t stop them as they followed everyone, moving through the entrance like a bunch of zombies.

The ancient entity extinguished his flame, but even in the dark Alice could still feel his eyes on her. She found herself petrified, glued to the spot, unable to move.

The next morning, the police found Alice Wright standing in the middle of an open field, frozen to death.

No crowd, no ringmaster, no amusement park...just a dead girl holding a bouquet of black roses.

THE LAST TEMPTATION

By: Suzie Lockhart

*Appeared in Sirens Call Issue 5 eZine
"What goes around comes around".*

"Bossman, don't worry. They will come." The familiar's voice held a pleading note while trying desperately to reassure his master.

Victor patted the small man's head as though he were nothing more than a pet, then dragged long fingernails through his thinning hair, lightly scratching the scalp. A shudder ran through the man's round little body.

"I sincerely hope so, Anthony."

The scent of human flesh and blood wafted through the air. Victor inhaled deeply, drinking in the warmth pulsating through the night. His mouth watered as he imagined himself drinking the delicious crimson liquid.

He wondered what tasty morsel the others were bringing him tonight. During the several hundred years he'd been a vampire, Victor had found himself gradually developing a taste for younger and younger victims. The youthful blood seemed filled with an undeniable vitality, invigorating him and causing him to crave more.

"I shall be waiting inside." Victor dismissed the familiar as he entered his private quarters.

The vampires disguised themselves as a traveling circus, moving from city to city. Victor always stayed in his tent. His appearance was somewhat odd, thus he did not blend well.

So he sent the newer ones to do his bidding.

Vampires aged slowly, but Victor had been undead since the time of the black plague. It had ravaged his family, centuries ago. Watching them die, one by one, had been devastating. True torment was watching his beautiful five year old daughter endure unspeakable agony.

Victor had just turned fifty when Rachel entered the world. It had been a difficult pregnancy for his forty-six year old wife, but the child had brought them great joy.

Victor sighed, still yearning for his family.

“Bossman?” Anthony called from outside the vampire’s tent, seeking permission to come inside.

“Enter,” Victor commanded.

The small man’s face was animated as he informed his master, “We have something special tonight! Yes, very special indeed!” His expression was eager as he added, “A young girl.”

“Hmm,” Victor mused, “bring her.”

The vampire watched in anticipation as Anthony reached outside.

The child stood before him, unafraid. Victor’s eyes widened at the sight of her porcelain skin, the dark brown curls, the big blue eyes...

“Are you gonna take me to my daddy?” she asked.

Victor’s voice was consumed with unbridled rage. “Take her home! See that not a hair on her head is harmed!”

The familiar trembled, from fear that he had angered his master

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?” Victor admonished, his fangs protruding menacingly.

“Okay, bossman. Sssorry,” he stammered, cowering away as he left with the girl.

Victor was shaking from head to toe as he walked slowly to an ancient trunk holding his belongings. He gently slipped out the delicate painting. Surely, this must be some sort of punishment for his vile deeds, for the young girl brought before him tonight had appeared as an exact duplicate of his long dead daughter.

AFFLICTED

By Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Originally published in *Dark Eclipse Issue #7*

"We're all infected."- Rick Grimes

"Maddie, shh, be quiet! Do you want them to hear?" I whisper frantically while my little sister is whimpers clinging to my arm, and shaking uncontrollably. I'm shaking, too. I keep replaying the scene at Uncle Jim's in my head.

Our parents were out of town, so we were staying with my Uncle. We were having dinner when the windows all shattered, sending glass everywhere. Green smoke filled the house. Uncle Jim turned a bluish color, and then his eyes turned milky white. Since I had been closest to the window, I got little cuts all over, and blood was oozing out from some of them.

Suddenly, Uncle Jim stood up, and it looked as if he were sniffing the air. Then those creepy eyes turned towards me right before he growled and pounced on me. He was actually trying to bite me; attacking me like a rabid dog, foaming at the mouth and everything! I thought I was going to die, until Maddie whacked him over the head with a lamp, knocking him unconscious.

We hurried outside to see what had happened, and saw much of the same all over the neighborhood. Terrified kids running from crazed grown-ups. I grabbed Maddie and went back inside to get my uncle's shotgun. I'd been on a few hunting trips with him and my dad, it couldn't be much different than shooting a rifle.

"Cal. I'mm scarred," Maddie grabs my hand and points up. The staircase we're hiding under creaks, and something heavy causes dust to float down and settle on us. The realization begins to sink in that we are literally trapped; if they find us, there's no way out. Maddie knows it, too.

The infected people weren't like zombies in a video game. They were faster, and smart, in a way. They hunted in groups of three.

For some unknown reason, only adults have been affected by this virus, whatever it is. Biological warfare, maybe? I haven't seen anyone

normal over sixteen. One kid that was on the run with us but got caught; I shielded Maddie and couldn't help watching as they tore him apart in under a minute, plucking his bones dry.

He never even had time to scream.

"Achoo!" Maddie sneezes, and a gruesome, bloodstained hand pushes through the floorboards, clawing at the swirling dust as my sister screams.

I point the shotgun at the disgusting hand and yell, "Go! Run back outside now!" Maddie takes off as I pull the trigger. I blow the zombie hand to bits and then Maddie runs past him up the stairs. I follow close behind. Upstairs, a female one hops over the kitchen counter in hot pursuit.

It follows us outside, where another male is waiting. I whack the female with the gun. I hear a rumbling noise just before something snatches my sister.

I spin around to see a jeep ram the other zombie, crushing his head under its weight.

Maddie is huddled in the back of the jeep, shivering and scared. The kid driving has a mouthful of braces. He grins at me.

"You coming kid? This is only level one."

WHAT LIES BENEATH PT:1

By: Suzie Lockhart

*Appeared in Tales of the Undead, Suffer Eternal Vol. 3
"Welcome to the Uncanny Valley."*

Father warned me to stay away.

Children were not permitted near the King's army.

At least, not near the elite fighters referred to as *The Immortals*; no unauthorized persons were allowed.

I chose not heed his warnings; ignoring Father's counsel that immortality came with a price.

You see, being ten years of age and, consequently, almost a man... well, I *had* to know. My greatest desire was to be one of Xerxes Immortal soldiers, so I needed to see first hand just what it took to become one.

Xerxes had plenty of soldiers. But the Immortals were elite – Revered.

I wanted people to idolize *me* like that.

So one night my best boyhood friend and I hid beneath the burlap covering supplies on a cargo cart and rode down to witness the excitement first hand. Though I was slightly older than Razin, he was of a much larger stature. My family was poor and often times we could not eat properly; though my parents tried their best to provide.

It was a long, bumpy ride. I was growing concerned that we might not make it back before dawn and wondered what punishment would be bestowed upon us if discovered. My desire to see one of the Immortals first hand, however, was stronger than my fear of being lashed.

Surely they wouldn't do something so drastic as to sentence two curious young boys to death simply because they had wanted to see these fearless soldiers?

My heart was racing with excitement when the cart finally came to a halt.

"What should we do now?" Razin whispered frantically. "We are going to be in so much trouble!"

"Just stay put." I mustered as much bravado in my tone as possible.

"But Javed..." he began.

“Shh, just remain quiet.” I was thinking to myself that Razin was quite the chicken, for such a large boy.

We both held our breath as commotion unfolded around us.

My first clue that something was amiss was the sound of a young woman screaming.

“Please, no,” she pleaded. “Show mercy, I beg of you. I’ve heard the rumors...*please!* I am needed at home. My mother has not recovered well from the birth of my baby brother.”

Her words tumbled out at a rapid pace while I chanced a peek from underneath our covering. Though barely a woman, the girl was full-busted and curvaceous – probably due partially to the fact she was a bit on the plump side. I was certain she was from a well-to-do family. Her long black hair shone in the moonlight and the robes she wore were constructed of a fine, iridescent fabric.

What had she done wrong?

“What’s going on?” Razin asked.

“I don’t know. Stay here.”

More terrified voices could be heard cutting through the night. I slinked into the shadows and made my way around the encampment. I expected to see the Immortals bathed in luxury, eating the finest foods as they watched beautiful women dance for their pleasure.

Was that why the girl had been brought here?

Instead, as I sneaked around to the other side of a huge tent, what I encountered was an enormous gated area. Armed guards, who were not the revered Immortals, were posted all around the area.

My heart was now pounding from fear. Something was not right. I stood as still as a statue, watching. I saw other soldiers bring the girl, along with a group of men and women. Many were slaves or prisoners; but not all. Each and every one looked well fed, which seemed odd. They were herded through the gate like cattle.

It was then I noticed the faces.

It caused my flesh to crawl; to look into their dead eyes glowing an ominous yellow against the dark night. The masks that the Immortals were rumored to wear in battle weren’t masks at all; rather, they were their real faces!

No masks were needed; their faces were horrifying enough.

An inhuman moaning could be heard as the people inside the confined area tried to claw their way out.

I could not see inside clearly but I didn't need to. I could hear those hideous monstrosities lunging at their trapped prey. The Immortals were literally ripping them apart, making slurping sounds as they fed on the organs inside. I could envision them devouring livers, intestines, lungs... certain it must be the most grotesque scene I had never witnessed.

"Here's dessert!" a guard yelled, and I had to suppress the gasp that nearly escaped me while I watched my friend, Razin, being tossed over the gate. Tears stung my eyes and terror seeped into my very soul.

What if they found me?

I crawled on hands and knees as quietly as I could back to the cart and slid underneath. I wedged myself between two wooden planks, remaining there until safely back at the village. My muscles screamed in protest, but the pain in my body could not match the pain in my heart. I mourned my friend, while at the same time fearing for my own life.

Once I was certain no one was around to see me, I rolled out from underneath and ran back to my home as fast as my skinny legs could carry me.

My mother was waiting, fury plastered on her face. That is, until she saw the look on mine.

"Javed, what is it? What has happened?"

I allowed her to envelope me in her warm embrace as I bawled my eyes out. I was afraid to tell her.

I was afraid to tell anyone.

I shook my head and whispered urgently, "It is better you do not know. *Please*, Mother..." I feared knowing would endanger her – perhaps my whole family.

When I thought of Razin and the pain his mother would feel at not finding him, I began to cry again.

When I was spent, my mother did something she had not done in some years. She tucked me into bed.

She smoothed back my hair and told me, "I am certain whatever experience you have had; it will help prepare you to become *An Immortal* someday."

My eyes widened in terror. "I no longer wish it, mother!" I croaked.

I saw the perplexed expression on her face. It was all I'd ever talked about; that I wished to fight for King Xerxes someday.

"Mother... how do the special soldiers become Immortals?" I tried to mask the trepidation in my voice.

"No one knows for certain," she replied. "It is said the medicine man has an elixir which gives them great strength. But you know what your father says, for everything there is a price – even immortality."

She kissed me on my forehead but I did not sleep well. Their golden eyes danced around me in my nightmares; the haunting moaning warning me to stay away.

WHAT LIES BENEATH PT:2

By Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Appeared in Tales of the Undead, Suffer Eternal Vol. 3

War is in a Spartans blood. It courses through our veins and fills us with a never ending hunger, a hunger to prove to those who would dare endeavor an attempt to bring Sparta to her knees that we bow to no man.

But the beings descending upon us now are not merely men. Mortal men have vital points, and when a spear pierces a life sustaining organ they bleed. Fear is reflected in their eyes with the knowledge that death is eminent.

Tales had preceded these Immortals.

Tales the Immortals were not mere men.

We had endured two days of relentless fighting with no sign of the fabled warriors; no sign of the supposed elite branch of the Persian army.

And I, king Leonidas, had been so foolish as to believe my few hundred Spartan soldiers could hold Thermopylae; but, alas, I've come to the bleak realization that we never stood a chance.

Though Xerxes's army had appeared unremarkable in skill thus far, their numbers vastly outnumbered ours. A commander could not have been more proud of his soldiers.

They fought valiantly, willing to follow me to the gates of Hell in order to defend Sparta.

It was on that third day of battle; however, that Hell truly arrived at our doorstep. That was the moment when any hope of victory began to drain from the very depths of my soul.

After withstanding hails of arrows, so numerous that they blotted out the sun, and fending off seemingly endless waves of Persian infantry, we came to meet the Immortals.

On this, that fateful day, the beginning of the end came in the form of a small boy tugging at my arm.

"My Lord! My Lord!" the anxious young voice pleaded, gasping for my attention.

"What is it child? Catch your breath and state your business." I took a moment to eye the thin child, puzzled by his sudden appearance, wondering

why had he been sent here; a far too dangerous place? My thoughts automatically traveled back to the days when I was his age, already training to become one of the mightiest warriors on the face of the earth... a Spartan.

Would my life have been different had I known; had I foreseen the horrors awaiting us this eve?

“My Lord. The council voted against sending forces from Artemisium. I was sent to inform you... warn you that you and your men are left to your own devices.”

Left to our own devices? Spears and shields against hordes of men? Or was there something coming; something bathed in such evil that it had been rumored to wear a mask in order to cover its hideous appearance?

Like a person gone mad, a maniacal laughter burst forth from deep within me. My men stared at me for a moment, bewildered.

“Do you hear this my brothers?” I shouted. “We have been left to our own devices! No one else is coming!” I banged my sword on my shield in mockery. “Death comes and our country betrays us.” My voice turned icy as the seriousness of our current state settled in. My arms became heavy; the weight of this burden causing me to feel much older than my years.

“But will we betray our country?” The words came out as a hoarse whisper, almost as if I was saying them to myself. I looked around at those brave men surrounding me, waiting...

I lifted my chin defiantly, demanding, “BUT WILL WE BETRAY OUR COUNTRY”?!

The camp erupted in a unanimous, “No”!

The flames of the campfire danced a macabre dance off the metal of my shield, casting an unnatural array of light and shadow upon the familiar faces surrounding me. I raised my sword high and proud.

“We will cause even the shadows to flee in fear, in fear of the Spartans!” I shouted, reigniting our morale, our resolve. As my brothers cheered in unison, I looked around to thank the boy.

He had disappeared; vanished without a trace.

Perhaps we had scared him off with our insane enthusiasm?

Even in this most dire of circumstances, the fighting spirit surged within me, my subconscious mind attempting to convince me that if we just kept rank and held them back another day or two, surely help would arrive.

I barely rested as the night grew darker and the moon slipped behind misty gray clouds. Something stirred me from my restless slumber.

Something foreign – Evil.

An odd sound echoed through the night and a cold chill ran up my spine. I knew it was not my imagination because the others had risen as well.

“My King, what is that awful noise? It sounds like a clogged battle horn.” A soldier laughed uneasily. After a few short moments, however, the origin of the mysterious noise revealed itself.

The channel lying to our side was resonating with the strange sound, reminiscent of dying animals. Then all at once it stopped. The thick air surrounded us, filling the battlefield with its weight, leaving nothing but complete and utter silence.

As quiet as death itself.

The night’s black embrace enveloped me for a moment, and then I beheld the unholy, glowing yellow eyes. First one pair, then another, and so forth and so on until the dark void was filled with their sinister glow.

Apparently, the fabled skull masks were rumor. The reality was they needed nothing other than the faces they wore to instill a sickening fear into the heart of their enemies. The faces that greeted us were already contorted in the most hideous ways imaginable. Garish fangs pierced through bloody, scabbed lips and tongues lolled out of chipped-away cheeks. They were the fiercest of animals and we were their prey.

I was stunned.

How did they know about the pass; how had they outflanked us?

Briefly, my eye caught a flash of gold and I saw a coin lying on the sand at my feet. Persian gold. Apparently, the local boy from earlier had betrayed his own kind when offered the right bounty.

He’d fed us to the wolves for money. Who knows what that swine Xerxes had promised him.

I said a quick prayer to the Gods of Olympus.

“Athena, give me wisdom. Ares, give me strength.”

I plunged my spear into the nearest beast; aiming for the heart. My accuracy was keen but he did not die; rather, his jaw sprung open and he lunged toward me. The blade slid out of his back and, after my initial shock, I drew my sword and beheaded him.

I could not contain my disgust as the head rolled off, still gnawing away at nothing, eternally hungry. At some point the sun rose over the horizon to reveal the true terror of the Immortals. We had been caught off guard, out of formation and even I, Leonidas, found myself petrified as I witnessed the flesh tearing from my brother's bones.

Tears stained my battle hardened face while they continued swarming us like bees from a hive.

I knew then that I would die a warrior's death.

I would not fall to my knees.

I would not submit to the monstrosities before me.

Rather, I would take as many of them as I could with me... into the afterlife.

THE DEAD BOY AND THE LAVENDER SUIT

By: Suzie Lockhart

Originally published in Chicagoland Journal & Top Ten Finalist in Women On Writing, Spring Flash Fiction Contest

"A tale my mother once told me... mother knows best."

"After supper, he didn't feel well, so he went to bed early," Aunt Gertrude wailed to my mother. "When I went to check on him, he was..."

I'd already heard enough about how my cousin Georgie died, so I stuck my fingers in my ears and sat counting the green and beige tiles on my aunt's kitchen floor. I was feeling rotten enough, on account of how I'd treated Georgie last time we visited. My Grandpappy had bought me a pearl white music box for my tenth birthday, with a tiny dancer inside. It had cost a whole dollar and a half! Georgie wanted to play with it, and I wouldn't let him. I told him to go ask his mother to buy him one. My Uncle Pete was a big cheese; they had lotsa money.

We were real poor, see? It's not like we lived in a Shantytown or anything, but I didn't get new stuff too often. My dresses were mostly hand-me-downs, and my folks couldn't afford luxuries like toys and such. So I didn't want anything to happen to my special present.

But Georgie always shared.

My Aunt Gertie's howling about my dead cousin was getting especially obnoxious, and, unable to take it anymore, I sneaked outside. I sat down on the steps overlooking the neighbor's alley, where we'd often played boxball. Sometimes, he gave me a piece or two of his nice new chalk to take home, so I could use it for hopscotch.

The grown-ups talked so loud that I couldn't help overhearing them as they discussed which suit to bury him in.

"I paid five dollars for that lavender suit, Dolores! It was supposed to be for Easter Sunday!" With that, Aunt Gertie broke down into hysterical sobs again.

Curiosity quickly replaced my guilt over not sharing my treasured present. What kind of get-up cost five whole bucks? I imagined, for a moment, all the penny candy I could buy at the corner store with that kinda loot. Then I decided I had to see what a five dollar purple suit looked like.

Clutching my music box, I crept back into the house, careful not to let the screen door slam behind me. There was a back stairwell that led to the second floor, so I tiptoed up to Georgie's room. I always envied that he had a whole room just to himself.

Lying on his bed, side by side, were two suits. One was a plain three piece, in a Copenhagen blue color.

The one next to it was the finest shade of lavender I'd ever seen. My hand trembled as I reached out to touch the exquisite wool fabric. I certainly had never owned anything in such a lovely hue; all of my dresses were faded and worn. Catching a glimpse of myself in the ornate full-length mirror across the room, I cringed. With my frizzy red hair and my washed out turquoise dress, I looked like a rag-a-muffin.

Licking my tongue over suddenly dry lips, I sat down gingerly, next to what would've been Georgie's Easter suit. Setting my music box carefully on the side of the bed, I picked up the jacket.

As I stood and slipped it on, I had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach; like I was trespassing.

In a graveyard. At night.

"Hooey!" I chided myself as I looked in the mirror, admiring how the color made my blue eyes sparkle.

A noise from the other side of the room sent me jumping out of my skin. Behind my reflection in the mirror, a shadow seemed to slither up from beneath the closet door.

"Aughh!" I screeched, shaking off the jacket. It fell to the floor as I fled the room, scurrying down the stairs to find my mother, sitting alone in the parlor.

I rushed into her arms, sniveling.

"Why, Mattie, you look like you've just seen a ghost!" she exclaimed.

A creaking sound startled me. I watched in horror as my Aunt handed me that dreadful lavender suit. "I'm going to bury Georgie in the blue suit. Maybe your mother can make you something pretty?"

Georgie always told me to be careful what I wished for. I got that cursed lavender suit, but I guess he got my music box, because I never saw it again.

SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Previously published by *Dark Lore*

“The fairytale you sold me, a taste of what you told me.” - Gin Wigmore

Beelzebub, Abaddon, Belial, Leviathan, Morningstar, Deceiver, Satan, and my personal favorite, Lucifer.

I’ve been called all these names. I am the big bad, the ultimate evil. The Devil himself.

In the flesh...so to speak.

I knock loudly on my latest client’s motel door, and pronounce in my booming, supernatural sing song voice, “James Timothy Wilcox, you signed a contract. Time to pay up!”

I can’t help but stifle a laugh, as his pale white face peeks out from behind the chained threshold.

“Youurr nnott reall!!” he declares, like a terrified child, then proceeds to slam the door in my face. His fear disgusts and exhilarates me all at once; I really do enjoy my job. There are **6,973,738,433 humans** on this useless rock, and for every **100,000**, I have a chance of getting one pathetic little signature. Another forfeited soul, no strings attached. Ha ha.

So, you see, I get roughly **69,000** souls a year, which estimates into **9** a day. One has to be good at arithmetic in my line of work. I’m a very busy man. Jimmy boy, here, is having difficulty getting with the program. Trying to hide behind this sleazy motel’s door, in this remote area of Ohio.

He’s inside, screaming his head off, and I’m becoming slightly agitated. I can feel burning bile, rising from my abdomen into my throat. I open my mouth and let out a massive flame, which instantly incinerates the wooden barrier between us.

Jimmy has a gun pointed at me. Quite amusing. I proceed to make it melt in his hand, and he shrieks with what must be the most agonizing pain he’s ever felt. I watch curiously as the hot weapon burns through his skin, melding metal with flesh and bone.

It looks hideous, but it’s only a taste of what I have in store for Jimmy. My snakelike tongue unconsciously licks over my lips; the hunger

inside me pulsating, thrashing around like a caged animal desperate for release.

This whole forsaken race has to pay, for what *He* did to me. I was once a beautiful creature, light itself, before *He* cast me out, banishing me like a pet who'd done something wrong. *His* precious mortals would be the ones to pay the price.

I will attempt to torture them all, one by one.

Speaking of, I almost forgot Jimmy. I chuckle at my own cleverness, and swiftly pull out our contract. I stare at the whimpering mess on the floor; my eyes penetrating through his being, tugging on his essence, taunting his soul.

He studies my appearance, which I change quite frequently, and tonight I've decided on long black tails, a sharp goatee, and sharp fingernails that pop out like something from a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon.

"Pleaase I j-just wanted to help my brother?"

Oh, here we go with the twisted logic and tiresome coping. "You wanted to help your brother, who had terminal cancer."

He nods frantically, pleading to negotiate. I talk to him like I would talk to an owner who has to put down his dog, as I place a hand on his shoulder. "Your brother, who was miraculously cured, and then died in a car accident two days later."

Jimmy's crying now, and the smell of singed flesh fills the room. Smoke is seeping underneath my hand as it burns through his clothing. I continue, but he already knows what's coming. He is so easy to mold and control. "Your brother lived, then immediately went on a spree of his own. He was a bad seed, Jimmy boy. I'm sure all those women would agree."

My client stares at me wide-eyed, his expression haunted.

"B-but, he was my baby brother."

"Ah, yes. You would protect your baby brother at any cost. Which is why you killed the detective leading the case. He'd gotten too close to the truth."

He began weeping; it was pitiful, like an old person suddenly realizing something horrible they'd done years ago. "Please, *God* please."

The mere mention of *Him* causes me to snap out, and my razor-edged tongue slithers over sharp teeth right before I slash him across the face with it.

“*GOD* isn’t here, you maggot. Prepare to pay your penance! Prepare to burn...forever!” My long tongue wraps around his neck, like a python. I could easily break it, but I want to savor the moment, so I drop him to the floor.

I shove the contract in front of his face, demanding an answer from this cretin. “Is this not your signature!?”

He pushes his deformed body away from me, shaking from head to toe, and pulls out a cross with his good hand. My laughter echoes through the room, sounding like that of a madman.

“Jimmy, I’m not a fucking vampire, I’m the devil!” I hiss, “ Seriously, man!” My poor creatures of the night have become nearly extinct, thanks to the damned slayers *He* christened.

Still, the gesture was amusing.

Jimmy was crawling towards the window, and I was so caught up in the moment that I didn’t notice what he was trying to do. He broke through the glass, jumping from the three story hotel window. Glass cuts every inch of his body before he plummets, head first, to his death.

I sigh heavily, disappointed by my loss. Another little trick *He* added into his precious little human race.

Always, always giving them second chances.

Reincarnation.

It’s a very real mechanism, a reset button for anyone who dies of suicide. I’ve tried to eradicate this device, by spreading rumors about burning in hell for taking one’s own life.

None the less, I’ll find James Timothy Wilcox, in his next life.

After all, I have all the time in the world.

And in truth...

Eventually, they always sign.

TEN TO MIDNIGHT

By: Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

*Appeared in Tales of the Undead, Suffer Eternal volume 2
What if you had a chance to choose between justice... or revenge?*

“Are you repentant, my son?” the Holy Father asks, his tone dripping with sincerity.

“Am I repentant?” I repeat quietly, more to myself than to him. The priest nods, attempting to reassure me that I’m heading towards a path to redemption.

It’s obvious that this man of the cloth believes *I* must be the one who took Lily’s life; the expression on his face says it all. The country’s criminal justice system wouldn’t make such an erroneous error, would they? I wonder if his firm belief of my guilt is rooted in lies the warden has poisoned his head with, or is the color of my skin enough to convince him.

The only thing I’d done wrong was falling in love.

And love can cause a person to act a fool.

I’d been staying with my Grandmother over the summer, trying to earn money for college. She had warned me, over and over again, that things in the South were far different than in New York. She often chastised me, telling me I was far too smart for my own good.

“Don’t you get mixed up wit dat white girl, boy. Ya’ here me?” Gram scorned harshly, after discovering one of Lily’s pictures on top of the nightstand. “You don’t understand. Here in Mississippi, dey’ll kill you over sumthin’ like that there, Donnie!”

“Am I repentant?” I repeat once again, lost in my own tortured thoughts. Was there something I felt sorry for? I was sorry for ever putting Lily in danger; for not being more careful. That was the guilt that has been chained to my soul; ever since I found out she’d been murdered that night.

After we were discovered together.

Rotting away in this miserable hellhole was tolerable compared to the heart-wrenching grief that remained my constant companion.

I was sure death would be a welcome relief; that is, until these last few hours. Now, I find myself filled with uncertainty.

“This would be the time to confess, and plead for Christ’s mercy on your everlasting soul.” The priest hooks his index finger inside his white

collar and tugs at it, as if the room has suddenly become too warm for him.

I look him directly in the eye, adding to his discomfort. “The only thing I’m sorry for, *Father*, is that I didn’t have the opportunity to kill Lance Blackwater.”

The priest slams his Bible shut in disgust and shakes his head at me. He mumbles a prayer under his breath and calls for the guard. My sadness is quickly replaced with uncontrollable anger. How badly I wanted to grab that priest by his shoulders and shake some sense into him.

Two guards; Roy, who I despise, and a younger guy I hadn’t noticed before, step in and grab me under the elbows, jerking me to my feet. The shackles rattle, causing shivers to surge through me, and my blood runs cold. A part of me suddenly has the urge to holler after the Holy Father, to beg for mercy. Panic overrides sense momentarily, and I feel ready to confess to anything if it will grant me some assurance.

Assurance for my immortal soul. Will I find rest? Or will my afterlife be never-ending torment because I had put Lily at risk. Did that mean I *was* ultimately responsible?

I clamp my mouth shut as my bound feet shuffle towards the execution chamber. My eyes burn, but I bite the inside of my lip; I won’t give into the tears that are threatening to spill over.

The guards shove me roughly into the traveling electric chair, the one that will soon end my days on this earth. I glance up at the clock above the observation room and see that it is nearing the midnight hour. It doesn’t matter; no pardon will be coming.

Not for me.

“Any last words, *boy*?” I hear the warden’s voice boom through the intercom.

I shoot him a hateful look through the window, trying purposely to avoid looking in the direction of Lily’s parents.

“What’s a matter?” Roy hisses. I don’t know who I despise more, him, or the warden. “Usually our uppity New York negro is full a fancy words.” I take the opportunity to spit in his puffy red face. There is nothing more the filthy bastard can do to me. Except punch me, which he does.

Time seems frozen as I wait for the end. I wonder if I’ll see Lily again, in the afterlife. And my Gram, who had died during the years I’d spent rotting behind bars? Had I made it back to New York, I would’ve been getting ready to graduate from the college

I'd been accepted to; to receive a teaching degree. I had dreamed of helping mold young black minds in the inner city.

Dreamed of making my mother proud; the first young man in our family to go to college. Everyone had had such high hopes...

My thoughts are interrupted as they begin the process of securing me to that hideous chair. Heavy leather straps crisscross over my chest, and my wrists are fastened to the arm rests. The brevity of the situation takes hold, and my hands clench tightly around the edges, my short fingernails digging painfully into the wood. Shudders run through me as the execution team fits a helmet around my head. Some of the slimy saline smeared inside the headpiece trickles down my face; mingling with tears I hadn't even realized I'd begun to shed.

Knowing your time is up is enough to make any grown man cry.

I hear Roy snicker.

Everything is blurred, but I can just make out Lily's parents, watching from behind the window.

They still believe I killed their daughter.

Why wouldn't they?

The usual procedure is to blindfold an inmate in this situation, but by special request of the warden, I will not be granted this luxury.

They tell me they are ready. I take a deep breath and decide to say a short prayer. I try to think of what to ask for.

"To see Lily again, to hear her gentle voice, touch her skin." I whisper to a God I hope hears my plea. A God I want to believe created us *all*. If there's no justice in life, maybe we find it once we move beyond.

That feeling of uncertainty has returned, causing my gut to clench just before they pull the switch.

"Midnight." An unfamiliar voice announces over the intercom. I hear the executioner throw the switch. The portable generator roars to life, blasting electricity into every pore of my being. The pain is indescribable. My body twitches spasmodically, my limbs moving of their own accord. I can no longer control my own breathing.

Out of nowhere, an array of bright light surrounds me. I feel myself begin to pull away from my body, and then...

The lights come back on and I manage to force open one eyelid. I squint at the glass, even as my scorched nerves scream in protest; Lily's mother has her face buried in her husband's chest. My other eye opens

slowly, deliberately, and my gaze roams over to the despicable warden. The corners of his thin lips curl into a sneer as he tilts his head forward.

It takes me a second to realize he's not nodding at me, but rather to the executioner.

To my horror, the switch is flipped a second time.

I hear my own flesh sizzle; the noise reminiscent of a piece of bacon frying. Volts of electricity tear through my veins, rattling my entire body. I howl uncontrollably at the excruciating torture, begging for it to end. My body blisters with hot intensity, as flames seemed to engulf me.

Then, nothing.

No pain, no agony. Just...nothing. My body feels lighter, somehow; yet I don't feel the relief I thought death might bring.

"Lily?" I call, tentatively opening my eyes; halfway expecting her to be waiting at the pearly gates for me. I gasp as I realize I am still inside the electric chair. A horrific thought crawls into my head; what if they have to pull that switch again?

But, quickly I realize, I'm all alone.

The straps and headpiece have come loose, so I stand up, unable to comprehend what is going on. Everything is dark, except for the flickering orange emergency lights.

I rush to the door to see if it is still locked, and to my disbelief, it swings open. My skin prickles as I enter the hallway, uncertain of what I might find. Fear is twisting my gut into a knot as the heavy metal doors swing open, one by one, like a row of dominoes. Then, the lights overhead click on, seemingly of their own accord.

I take off running down death row. All the doors along the hallway are ajar. I start to holler out inmate's names, but all I'm greeted with is an eerie silence; every last cell is empty.

Is this some kind of hallucination?

A cold shiver runs through me.

I tear through the prison, filled with desperation as I call out the names of anyone I can think of; prisoners, guards...

Nobody is there, not one single soul.

Shouldn't I at least hear my own voice, echoing through these hallways?

Fear finally overwhelms me, and I sink to the floor. The prison appears completely deserted; I really am in here all alone. Is this the way I

am destined to spend eternity?

An odd scraping noise reverberates through the abandoned hallways, and I raise my head as I recognize the sound of a needle settling onto a record. Music I am far too familiar with fills the air. The mournful lyrics beckon me in the direction of the warden's office.

Tears fall unabashedly as the words from that night return to haunt me.

*"I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz,
Now I know just how much I have lost.
Yes, I lost my little darlin' the night they were playing...
The beautiful Tennessee Waltz."*

A thought penetrates the fear. Will Lily be waiting for me? Will she be wearing the powder blue gown; the one she'd had on the night of her prom? The night she had sneaked out behind the gym to dance with me. The night Lance followed her and...

I fling open the door to the dimly lit office. A lone figure sits in the warden's chair, his feet propped up on the desk as he finishes the lyrics in a raspy voice.

*"I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz,
Now I know just how much I have lost.
Yes, I lost my little darlin' the night they were playing
The beautiful Tennessee Waltz,
The beautiful Tennessee Waltz."*

"What the...who are you?" At first, I couldn't see him very well. It was as if he were a shadowy figure, lurking behind a thin veil

"Name's Clarence." The man stands, materializing more clearly. He is wearing a sleek black suit with a pinstriped vest underneath. Covering his wavy, snow white hair is a top hat, and he holds a gold-tipped cane in his left hand.

"And my name's George," I say, glowering at him.

A twinkle appears in his light periwinkle eyes. Eyes like a devil, I think.

"What kind of game is this?"

"No game, Donnie."

"How the *hell* do you know my name?" My voice rises in anger.

"Shhh," Clarence admonishes. "You see Donnie, you've been given a special gift tonight. An opportunity... for justice." I see the glint of a gold

tooth as he speaks.

I back away. “What the hell are you talking about, old man?”

He continues on, speaking in a hushed tone “For the next twenty-four hours, Donald Quinn, you’re a half-life.”

“A half-life?” This must be some whacky dream; none of this is making any sense.

“Yes, Donnie, a half-life. A soul wavering on the edge, between life and death.”

“I must be off my nut,” I grumble, remembering the line from Lily’s favorite movie. I don’t know how this *Clarence* fellow knows my name, or where he comes from, and at this point, I don’t care. I turn to leave. A chill runs through me as Clarence unexpectedly appears in front of me, blocking the threshold.

“How the hell?”

His eyes bulge at me for a minute, and his grayish eyebrows knit together in a deep frown. “You’re wasting time, Donnie.” Then, as if reading my mind, he says, “Seek justice, Donnie. You owe it to Lily, if not yourself.”

Hearing her name is the last straw. I barrel past him, sprinting through the deserted corridors of the prison, going nowhere.

Clarence appears again, materializing in different places, following me all the way back to the room where the empty electric chair sits. I can’t seem to escape him.

“Why!?” I scream, falling to the floor as overwhelming sadness rises to the surface, threatening to overtake me. I gasp. “Why can’t you just let me die?”

“There’s no justice in a *wrongful* death, Donnie...” Suddenly, this Clarence guy begins to age dramatically, right before me. His cheekbones hollow out, and his eyes fade to a dull gray.

He pulls a silver pocket watch from his inside his vest and encloses my hand around it. “You have a chance now...Donnie. A chance for... retribution”

“What would you know about it?” I spit vehemently, but I don’t get an answer as he seems to fade before my eyes. Panic equal to the pain in my heart quiets me.

All at once it feels as if the temperature in the execution chamber has dropped thirty degrees.

His now faint voice struggles. "I know that you didn't... kill her. Lance Blackwater's father... personally orchestrated the prosecution's case against you, using you as a cover... for his own son's heinous crime." He coughs, and the music begins to play again, louder and louder, but I can still hear Clarence, feel his cool breath as if he was talking right against my ear. His body looks fragile, and he has an ethereal, silvery mist encompassing him.

I anticipate what he is going to say next; somehow I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is all real.

Smiling weakly, he says. "I know...this is the last song you and Lily danced to. Before she was murdered."

His unnaturally calm voice booms over the loud music. The walls of the prison begin to crack, as if the music itself is tearing it apart.

Clarence transforms into something inhuman; terrifying and mesmerizing at the same time.

His tone, while still commanding, carries hollowness. "Seek justice, Donnie. You only have twenty-four hours!"

There is urgency in Clarence's voice as his final words reach my ear. "The watch has the power to help you...use it *wisely*..."

A shiver runs down my spine.

"What do I need to do?" I cry.

All I hear in return is something akin to a shriek, and I can barely make out the words carried within. "Twenty-four hours!"

Mist rises from the floor, swirling around me as if trying to swallow me up. I feel cold, and then I feel myself blacking out.

When I awake, I discover I'm lying on a sidewalk, across the street from a picturesque house, sporting a perfectly manicured lawn.

The coldness seems to linger inside of me now.

Dawn is breaking; I see a newspaper already tossed at the end of the driveway. A truck barrels up the street, and a stout man hops out from behind the wheel, taking two milk bottles over to the front porch.

I consider how surreal the whole thing seems, as he grabs the empty ones and then turns around. I suck in my breath and wait for him to shout something at me about being in the wrong neighborhood.

He says nothing; acting like he doesn't even notice me as he whistles his way back to the truck.

I holler after him as he drives away, until the sound of a barking dog causes me freeze. I don't care for dogs; I've had one too many bad experiences. It stops short, about a foot away from me, sniffing at the air in confusion. It only takes a moment for me to realize the snarling beast can't see me.

The owner of the dog is grabbing his morning paper, yelling after it. The sound of Lance Blackwater's voice slices through me like a knife. As he stands in his plush navy bathrobe and slippers, waiting for his dog, I charge at him. The thought of killing him consumes me.

And I fall right through him, landing flat on my face. Furious, I stand back up and swing wildly at him.

Nothing. No reaction.

How the hell am I gonna make this dirty bastard pay, if I can't even touch him?

"Damn!" I curse, trailing after him into the house.

"Sharon!" Lance yells, stomping up the carpeted staircase. "Sharon! You damn well better get your ass outta bed and have my breakfast ready by the time I'm dressed!"

My mind is whirling. He has a wife?

At the top of the stairs, he flings open the bedroom door and shouts at her again. She jumps off their bed and pulls on a housecoat, but not before I see the purple marks on her arms. A faded yellow bruise on her left cheek mars her otherwise perfect features.

"I'm going," she tells him, twisting her golden blond hair into a knot as she rushes out of the room.

My hands clench into fists and my eyes bore into him. Lance walks into the bathroom and turns the shower on full blast. I hover in the corner as he pulls aside the hideous Hawaiian print curtain and steps inside the tub. I'm seething; wanting to destroy him. Wanting to crush every bone in his body. Wanting...to kill him. Clarence's words run through me as rage consumes me. Retribution.

"Yesss." It sounds like a hiss. Hmph. Must just be the rising steam in the bathroom.

The sight of the mirror on the front of the medicine cabinet catches my eye.

Maybe there is another way to get Blackwater's attention?

I move over to it, and lifting my hand very slowly, I use one finger to touch the mirror's moist surface. I form the letter "L" in the mist, and, seeing that it works, proceed to spell the rest of her name. I write it several times before planting myself on top of the toilet tank to wait, anxious to see the bastard's reaction.

He steps out of the tub, damp footprints sinking into the shaggy throw rug. Automatically, he opens the door of the medicine cabinet and grabs a comb. I watch his face as he shuts it and gasps.

"What the hell?!" Lance's face contorts with a combination of fear and anger as the steam separates, revealing the message I have left for him.

"Lily. Lily Lily Lily."

He rubs his hand frantically across the mirror as I take a spot behind him. While my reflection isn't visible, my presence does appear to disturb the dense air surrounding me.

Lance spins around.

"Who's there?" he demands. "What kind of trickery is this?"

He can't hear me, even though I scream in his face. He does take a step back, however, as though he may have sensed *something*. Reaching under the sink, he grabs a dust cloth and rubs it vigorously over the mirror.

"Humph." Lance rushes out of the bathroom to get dressed.

I decide to follow him to work. I slide into the back of his bronze Mercury, complete with color coordinated seats. Apparently, Lance had done well for himself.

Riding on his daddy's coat tails, no doubt. I hover behind him, unnoticed, as he strides into the law firm like he owns the place. He stops at his secretary's desk, and leans towards her, his hand gripping the desk.

"Coffee," he sputters.

"Right away, Mr. Blackwater."

I catch a whiff of the strong brew as his secretary heads into his office. Interesting that I hadn't been able to smell anything at his home. Taking a seat at her desk, I press on one of the typewriter keys. Discovering I can move it, I filled the whole page with the same message I'd given Lance earlier.

It is taking awfully long for her to serve him coffee. Something disturbed me; a rustling noise coming from the window. There is something enticing about the sound. It sounds like someone whispering. I strain to

hear, but noises from inside Lance's office grab my attention away from the window.

After giving it a moment's thought, I wonder if I can walk through the office wall. I stand in front of it and test it out by sticking my hand through. The rest of me follows with ease. My eyes widened as I discover why they'd been in here so long.

"Pig!" I spit in his ear. He swats the side of his face, as if a fly had disturbed him. I was gritting my teeth. This was not working.

I stare out the large tenth floor window, trying not to listen as Lance moans with pleasure. Fury overwhelms me, as all at once I catch sight of the mug of coffee, sitting untouched on the edge of his desk. I focus as hard as I can, sliding it towards the entangled couple, and giving it a hard shove.

"Augh! Damnit, Cheryl!" He begins cursing at his secretary as she quickly stands to straighten her long skirt, fiddling anxiously with the tiny buttons on her cardigan sweater. The hot liquid has burned the bastard's bare leg, and some splashed onto his trousers.

Lance yanks up his pants and tightens his belt, as his flustered secretary rushes out.

Her shrill scream follows a few seconds later. She rushes back into his office and slams the door shut, apparently more disturbed by what was typed on that paper, than afraid of Lance. A heated argument ensues, until he grabs the sheet from her. His eyes widened, and he sinks into his chair, muttering, "Go."

Lance sits, rubbing his temples. "What the hell is going on?"

While scaring him has given me some small sense of satisfaction, it's not enough. I stick my hands into my pocket and feel the chilled metal of the watch. I pull it out and open it, trying to remember all that Clarence had told me. I had fourteen hours left.

Fourteen hours to do what?

Play more games with Lance? Furious, I throw the pocket watch across the room. It bangs against the window, and before I could blink, materializes back into my hand.

When I glance up, Blackwater is staring at the window, his mouth hanging open.

New possibilities begin to take shape. If I can focus my anger, concentrate it, it appears I might make him feel my presence.

I'd been so enthralled with the prospect of hurting him; I hadn't noticed him pulling a handgun out from behind his desk.

"Nnoww, I know somebody's there. Show yourself." He says, sounding like a scared child. I scoff at how pitiful he looks right now. The sound I'd heard outside the office comes back, except it's more distinct this time.

I can understand the whispers as they urge, "*Show, show...*" I can feel my body tingling as the silvery mist appears again. My connection to it is undeniable; I can almost control it.

I open the watch again, realizing it will enable me to communicate what I want. Lance gasps as my body becomes visible for a brief instant; I glare at him before fading away.

"Holy shit!" I had showed myself to Lance, just as he'd requested, and am rewarded with his reaction. He is truly shaken now, and gingerly places the gun back inside his desk. He opens a bottle of aspirin and pops a few of the tablets.

"I need a drink; this is all just too much..." He tries to reassure himself that his mind must be playing tricks on him, but we both know better.

Briefly, the thought of what will happen when this is all said and done surfaces like a challenge. What if I can't get justice before the time runs out, what then? Will I be stuck like this forever?

Or worse...?

A shudder runs through me, what if there's nothing for me after this? What if I'll just cease to exist? I shake off the notion and follow Lance back to his car. He has to pay, regardless.

As he drives around for a while, I stretch out in the back seat. I'm beginning to feel a little tired. I start to wonder if a better idea would be to drive Lance so insane that he takes his own life. Then his blood wouldn't be on my hands, but he'd still be dead.

We finally pull into a bar. "What can I get you?" the bartender asks.

"Martini." Lance says, taking a spot on a wobbly bar stool before lowering his head onto his arms, crossing them in front of him on the counter.

A breeze seems to blow in through the closed door of the bar, and then there are the whispers again. It's like they are giving me hints on how

to tap into my otherworldly abilities. I open the watch again, and the mist circles around the bartender. "*Possess, possess.*"

I hesitate before the mist engulfs me, pulling me towards the greasy-looking man. The whispers become more insistent, so I obey and step into the man's body. The next thing I know, I'm viewing the world through the bartender's eyes. I stare down at my now white knuckles, and feel somewhat repulsed as I notice the dirt under his fingernails.

"Hey Ed, how about that martini?" Lance's voice startles me. There must be something I can do, some way to influence Lance. Otherwise, why would I be controlling this man's body?

And that's when my eye catches it. On a dirty piece of paper, next to the small television covered in colored cellophane, is a list of popular drinks and how to make them.

White Lily

- 1 oz. Gin
- 1 dash Pernod
- 1 oz. white Rum
- 1 oz. Orange juice

I quickly mix the contents together and shake it with some ice. "Here." I slam it down in front of him, waiting expectantly. "It's on the house." I offer.

"Yea, thanks Ed. Hey, what is this, anyway? I asked for a Martini."

"I thought you could use something stronger, Lance. So I made you a *White Lily*." I give him a hard stare through the bartender's beady eyes. His hand begins shaking feverishly, and the drink slips out, spilling on the marred wood. He gapes at the bartender before stumbling out of the bar.

"God, this is some kinda damn stinking nightmare." I see him fidgeting with his keys when I hear the whispers. I ignore them as I follow Lance to a nicer hotel bar. I am rendered disgusted by what I've just done. Being one with that bartender made me feel...dirty. Like I would never be able to scrub off the filth. Not from the bartender; rather, from what I had done to him.

Clarence's words resonate as I lean against the counter, twirling the watch through fingers that belong to me once again. "The watch has the power to help you...use it *wisely*..."

No one sees me, of course, as I stand next to Lance while he quickly downs some whiskey. Ironical, that in life, I wouldn't have been allowed in here.

Lance is pretty drunk by the time he piles back into his Mercury. I wonder if he'll crash the car, and that will be it for him. For me.

"*Lights.*" I hear it, and I clench the watch in my hand. This doesn't seem vile, as the deception in the first bar had.

As he drives down his street, I direct the mist to the lamp posts, bursting each one as he steers past.

He doesn't crash, but he pulls recklessly into his driveway, hitting the retaining wall. He curses up a storm as he jumps out and flees.

"Get the hell away from me!" he yells, scared out of his wits as he bursts through the front door and locks himself inside. I sigh. I know I can walk right through the door, but I feel my energy draining. My time is running short. I see that the clock reads 9:42. I had better figure something out, and do it quickly. I drag myself over and enter through their large front window.

"Lance is that you?" Sharon asks with mock sweetness.

"Yea, it's me. I'm not hungry." His voice is slurred, and he looks ten years older.

His wife comes out of the kitchen, wielding a huge chef's knife. If she didn't look completely mad, it might have been funny. She stomps her foot. "That's good, 'cause I didn't cook. You wanna tell me who the hell Lily is, you son of a bitch! I saw her name on the mirror upstairs..."

"Put the damn knife down!" Lance demands angrily.

His wife ignores him, seething. "I went by your office today, Lance. You weren't there, but that little hussy you've been sleeping with was."

"Now just a damn minute!" he tries yelling over her, but she starts throwing things at him. "Out! Get out!"

Again, we are in his car as he swerves away down the road.

Lance drives until he stops in the middle of a large bridge. He gets out of the car and walks over to the railing. It would be so easy to give him a shove...

I decide this is where I will seek retribution. This is where I will kill Lance Blackwater. I get ready to push.

"What do you want me to do, Donnie?" he asks, sounding defeated.

I hold tightly to the pocket watch in my hands. I know this is the opportunity I've been waiting for, but, suddenly, I'm not sure I can go through with it.

The silvery mist appears again, and I reveal myself to Lance. "No, no...this can't be possible." He racks his hand through his hair.

"Believe it!" I shriek, just like Clarence had; that same ethereal tone gripping my vocal cords as I grab him by his collar and lift him over the edge, letting him dangle far above the dark waters below. That's when I hear the voices again, hissing in my head "*Kill, kill.*"

The anger I feel at Lance, the scared, helpless, whining murderer in front of me, only intensifies. All I have to do is let go, and he'll plummet to his death. I'll have done the world a favor, wiping it clean of his wretched existence.

But I can't let him go?

"Please, please don't kill me!" he whimpers pitifully, as the voices become more forceful. "*Kill, kill!*"

No. I can't do it. After everything, I realize I don't have it in me to kill the son of a bitch. Besides, I think, if I let go, no one will ever know who Lily's real killer was.

I shake him, and he squeals.

"I'll never stop, do you understand me? For the rest of your worthless life, I'll find you... until I drive you to the brink of insanity. And don't even think about taking your own life, unless you wanna find out where low life's like you end up."

"What, then? What? I'll do whatever you say...pleassse," he whimpers.

"Get in your car. We're going to the police station." I pull him back onto the safety of the bridge's walkway, and shove his sorry ass towards his vehicle.

"Drive!" I growl at him, angry at myself for my weakness. He obediently obeys, until we reach the station.

Once there, I can feel myself wavering. Lance sits tapping the rim of the steering wheel. I grab his wrist, and he cowers at the sight of me.

"*They* can't make me leave you alone, Lance. Only you can do that." I threaten, and he nods, fully comprehending that there is no alternative left to him. Thoughts of my moments with the priest have me add

unintentionally, yet effectively, “Confession is your only path...to redemption.”

Finally, I listen as Lance confesses to everything. The officers look at him as though he must be crazy, but he knows details that only the true killer could possibly know. Details that turn my stomach, even as life seeps out of me. I fight to keep my eyelids open; I want to see. I want to see them take him away. The last image I see is one of the officers picking up the telephone...

Then everything once again goes black. I know I’ve done right by Lily, even if I was too weak for true retribution.

When I awake this time, I am lying on a bed in the prison’s hospital ward. A light is being shined at my pupils.

“What...what happened?” I croak.

“You passed out. At ten to midnight, Lance Blackwater made a full confession in the murder of Lily Parker. Due to the circumstances, Donnie, the governor has issued a stay of execution. Attorneys are already working on your release.”

Hearing the familiar voice, I look into the face of the man who spoke.

Somehow, I am not surprised to see a slightly younger version of Clarence, dressed in a white doctor’s coat.

“Well, Donnie, it appears you beat me at my own game.” He gives me a wink, but there is a malevolent look in his eyes that I hadn’t noticed before.

I reach into my pocket for the watch, but it’s gone.

“What are you talking about, Clarence?” I ask hoarsely, my throat feeling tight.

“We couldn’t take you, because you hadn’t killed anyone. If you would’ve killed Lance, well then...but, you, Donnie. You were even smarter than I gave you credit for. Making Lance confess. Hmph. Brilliant.”

Clarence begins to fade out; the silvery mist engulfs him.

“Maybe next time, Donnie,” he calls out, right before he disappears.

I sink my head onto the soft pillow, trying to absorb everything that has just happened. Sweat is beading on my brow.

It appears what I thought was cowardice kept me out of Hell.

THE SKÖLL AND THE SWINE

*By: Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd
Appeared in Barnyard Horror*

“Little pig, little pig, let me in.”

Elmer was circling the Farmer's feet, acting like he didn't want the man to leave. “What's wrong, Elmer?” The Farmer asked, scratching his pig behind the ear.

Not like the pig, of course, could relay what the problem was. Even if he could talk, how would he describe the baffling odor, caught up in the late summer breeze? The animal tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to plead with the Farmer through his eyes.

“Sorry, boy, I've gotta wash up for dinner.”

Elmer cocked his head as he stood, staring after his caretaker until the burly man opened the screen door and entered the red brick house.

There it was again. He lifted his snout in the air, trying to decipher just what, exactly, the odd smell was.

Feeling nervous was an unfamiliar sensation for the pig. His home, here on the farm, had always been a serene, comforting place; with an abundance of food, mud, and affection.

His ears perked up at the sound of a sickly howl in the distance. Elmer's siblings were busy splashing mud on each other, appearing not to have noticed.

The ruddy colored pig decided to join them and lumbered over to his favorite spot. They romped around in the cool mud bath, the delicious feel of the silt calming the Elmer's unease.

Just as he began to relax, another howl pierced the night. This time, it was closer, and what had been a faint whiff now became a pungent stench.

Peeking through the fence surrounding the pigs and their hut, Elmer saw a mangy looking animal staggering out of the forest, heading in their direction. Elmer had never seen a wolf before, so he wasn't aware it was a predatory animal.

A sworn enemy.

Still, long ingrained instinct made him wary.

He backed up, burrowing deep down into the mud as he tried to ignore the discomfiting new sensations rising within him. Elmer tried to pretend the animal wasn't there.

The pigs were startled when the disoriented wolf bumped into the wooden planks lining their pen. Milky eyes stared blankly at them as the beast growled; saliva seeping through its sharp teeth. Its gray fur was matted, and there were patches missing all over to reveal the discolored skin beneath.

Natural curiosity was competing with the pigs' inner promptings, as they stared back.

Decidedly unconcerned, one of Elmer's brothers snorted defiantly at the wolf.

The wolf snapped out of its befuddled state, and all at once the sickly beast charged the fence, snarling viciously at the prey just beyond its grasp. The wolf's diseased mind couldn't figure out how to get past the barrier, and it just kept banging into it; over and over again until blood began seeping out of small gashes all over its snout.

The three pigs watched in horrified fascination. The animal looked so pathetic, but Elmer couldn't seem to rid himself of the apprehension that had taken root deep down in his gut. He found himself so unsettled by the bizarre creature, that Elmer had even lost his ever-present appetite.

One last snarl and the predator turned away, swerving back and forth as it headed towards the woods.

Puzzled expressions crossed their features for a moment before the pigs cautiously returned to their pit. They sank into the mud, breathing quietly as they continued sniffing the air.

The unusual stench lingered, and the pigs weren't certain that the peculiar creature was truly gone. They couldn't understand why they were frightened of it; they just were. Lightening streaked through the sky, illuminating the trees that bordered the small farm, and the clasp of thunder that followed was enough to set the already antsy pigs' hearts racing. Three pairs of eyes darted to the spot they'd last seen the wolf as a cold front began blowing in fiercely from the north, tossing twigs, leaves, and other debris through the impending dusk. The sickening odor quickly dissipated into the twilight.

The other pigs disengaged themselves from their mud bath and meandered past the feeding trough, heading deep into their huts to sleep.

Elmer was still wary. Something about that animal had deeply disturbed him. Unable to shake his unease, he continued to take comfort rolling around in the soft, damp ground. The coolness washed over his frayed nerves, and listening to the farmer's voice drifting out through an open window, he gradually began to settle down.

Feeling drowsy, he made up his mind to join his brothers. When he entered the small dwelling, however, a sense of dread greeted him immediately.

A scratching sound could be heard near the far wall, and before he knew what was happening, the wolf's bloody muzzle had punctured the thin skin of their hut. Opalescent eyes held a sinister glare against the absence of light as a low pitched rumble rose from deep within the animal's throat.

The nearest pig squealed as he backed up into bales of hay resting in the center of the hut. The other two huddled near the front of the structure.

For the first time in his life, Elmer was truly terrified. He was able to discern that the animal intended to do them harm. The vile beast was pawing at the dirt floor, making its way quickly inside, his powerful jaws snapping greedily, eager to sink them into one of the plump pigs now within reach. Elmer had fled back outside, heading for the mud pit, his other sibling at his heels. Unable to resist the urge, he looked back just in time to see the other trapped pig trying to wriggle his ample form in between two piles of hay. It would have been comical, had it not been for the wolf bearing down on him.

Sharp teeth tore open the terrified animal's throat; a geyser of blood spraying everything nearby. Yellow hay was stained crimson as the wolf's assault continued. Elmer didn't know what to do or where to go.

Horrible slurping and licking noises could be heard as the wolf continued dissecting Elmer's brother. It ripped out huge chunks of flesh, spilling the pig's innards all over the floor of the hut.

Elmer whimpered uncontrollably, unable to divert his gaze away from the horrific scene. Tears welled up in the sensitive animals eyes.

Then another thought struck him, like the bolts of lightning that warned of the storm now raging outside.

Would one pig be enough to satiate this sick, crazed animal? Elmer shuddered; he had to escape! Motioning to his remaining sibling to follow his lead, the two of them slid quietly past the feeding frenzy.

The hole wasn't big enough for their large round bodies!

Elmer chewed and bit at the wall, and then pounded what was left of the structure with his snout, until the opening was large enough to set them free. By now, the wolf had finished its meal and all the racket caught its attention, and in mere minutes, the beast was following them outside. The two pigs split up; Elmer headed towards the Farmer's brick house, and the other took off towards a pile of lumber stacked in one corner.

Ouch! The wolf caught Elmer's tail between razor sharp teeth, so the pig kicked up his hooves, flinging dirt into the sick animal's eerie eyes. An irritated howl escaped the beast, and Elmer was released. After spinning around for several disoriented moments, it set off in the direction where the other pig had fled.

The wind was howling as a torrential downpour exploded from the clouds, like water balloons bursting off the ground. Lightning flashed, cutting through the darkened sky, which allowed Elmer to see the wolf prowling menacingly towards his remaining sibling. Its lips stretched wide apart in a hideous snarl.

The round logs tumbled at a frantic pace when the wolf charged them. All at once, the creature clamped its jaws down greedily on the pig's ear, ripping it off along with half his scalp. Grief overwhelmed Elmer as he huddled against the red farmhouse, shivering while pellets of rain pounded him. Helpless, he faced away from the grotesque sight.

He headed for the door of the Farmer's house, whimpering as he began slamming his body full-force against the metal frame of the screen door, panic causing him to repeat the process over and over again.

The wolf had finished his second meal, and was now sniffing the ground, searching for Elmer. The thin sticks that were its legs carried the wolf's deformed body with surprising speed.

The pig continued hitting into the door as the wolf found Elmer's scent. Again, Elmer threw his whole weight against the door frame. The wolf was bearing down on him; he knew his end was nearing.

The thought of the beast's fangs piercing his skin made him shiver, until something bumped him suddenly off the steps.

A loud blast rang through the night, and then the Farmer was standing over him, a grim expression marring his face.

"Two of my damn pigs!" He shouted, followed by a stream of cuss words. The Farmer patted Elmer. "It's alright now, boy." He headed towards where the wolf lay, dead and bleeding from a gunshot wound through its

scalp. Farmer Mike kicked the dead creature onto its side. “Don’t know what the hell kind of wolf that was.”

“Mike, does this pork smell strange to you?” the Farmer’s wife asked.

“Abby, I lost two whole pigs last month to that damned wolf. This one here was healthy. That’s too much money already down the drain to be worried about some pork not smellin’ right.”

Abby shrugged. “The Mendleson’s will be here by four tomorrow for their quarter of the hog. The Wrights and Hollysterns will be here for the other two quarters after six.”

Farmer Mike shook his head. “I don’t know how I’ll recover these losses, Abby.”

“We’ll make it. We have before.” His wife put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “C’mon inside. I’ll make us some bacon.”

PLAYING WITH FIRE

By Suzie Lockhart

*Appeared in Dark Moon's Mistresses of the Macabre
"The maternal bond is strong."*

I conceal myself amidst a cluster of bushes, watching the human woman.

She arrives nearly every evening, at about the same time. She wanders the docks, as if searching for something. All the while, her eyes remain focused to the entrance of the forest.

It always takes a moment to remember. I hold so many memories, absorbed with each one of my prey. It makes it hard to focus, but slowly images begin to take their shape.

Ahhh, yes.

It is a child's mother; one that I had lured many moons ago. The taste had been delectable. Children always have a particular relish, and are easiest to ensnare into my lair by the river. I wonder if the mother would have a similar flavor. My mouth waters at the thought, and saliva seeps through my teeth, dripping onto the bare branches.

The maternal bond is strong. The human woman yearns for her child. I feel my body shifting already.

Her child is long gone. Just one of the many meals needed for sustenance; for survival.

So hungry...

My insides rumble, and a small growl involuntarily escapes my throat. I crouch down lower as my form continues to change.

Winter is coming, and the visitors are all gone. Already, the mountains behind the forest are capped with white.

But this woman; she is always here.

Watching.

Waiting.

I see her eyes skirt the edges of the trees, and it's as if she knows...

I hear a warning inside me. A chill runs through my body, instinct urging me to leave. Try again tomorrow.

Long ingrained instinct warning me *not* to tempt this woman.

But I am starving, and food will soon be in short supply. My tongue involuntarily licks across my black, bumpy mouth, and I feel the coarse

gray hairs underneath my bottom lip disappearing. I take the form of the human child; the one that had been my victim so long ago.

The woman's eyes grow wide as I reveal myself, and her hand flies to her mouth. I use the soft tinkle of her child's sweet little voice as a siren; to lure this human woman. I will lead her into deep into the forest and trap her near the water. Perhaps it is what she desires? To die, as her child had.

So hungry...

Slowly, ever so slowly, she makes her way silently across the fine sand surrounding the island.

"Mama!" The child's voice cries out.

Ahh, it is working. She begins walking towards the trees. "Mama!"

Her steps quicken. "I'm coming, baby. Mama's here!"

I smile the child's smile, looking forward to the feast ahead.

Every so often I glance over my shoulder; to be certain she is following, as I lead her deep into the woods. At the river, I shall reap my reward. It is almost too easy. That unsettling feeling returns, urging me to leave this woman alone.

I scoff. What can this human woman do? She has no weapons, like the human men that often hunt. I sometimes play games with them, shifting as I weave in and out of the towering trees. But I never try to lure the hunters. I am too smart.

I chide myself as she continues following me deeper into the woods. There is nothing the woman can do. Her scent drifts through the air, and I close my eyes, savoring the sweet smell.

Where has she gone?

I can smell her, but I can no longer see her.

I spot her wandering in the other direction.

"Mama!" I cry. She turns back for a moment, and then continues up a hillside. What is she doing?

Now, *I* am following *her*. I pick up my pace. It is difficult in this child's body. Frustration wells up inside of me.

As I near the top of the hill, I sniff the air. An unwelcome stench greets me. Cautiously, I creep around the towering spruce trees and cringe as the sight of a campfire comes into view.

The menacing flames lick at me. That's when I see her, on the other side of the reddish-orange blaze. She points to the tent beside her, and puts a finger to her lips before disappearing again.

My frustration turns to anger as I scurry around the outskirts of the campsite, trying to find her. What kind of game is she playing?

Again, I feel something stir inside, signaling a threat. The sight of the fire has shaken me.

I'm left with no alternative, as I tread behind her. How stupid can she be? I am her child! She should be on *my* heels.

It is beginning to get dark. The moon offers little light as it rises in the graying sky. I hear wolves howling in the distance; I need to grab this woman and get back to my lair.

A pack of wolves is the last thing I wish to deal with.

The only thing worse than the wolves is fire...

I haven't survived this long by being stupid!

I should not go this deep into the forest, but I am determined to finish this.

To finish *her*.

I whimper in the child's voice, crying, "Mama, *please!*"

"Just a little further, baby." Her whispered words reach my ears.

I cannot turn back. While the need to flee is strong, there will be no satisfaction until I tear her apart.

I see that she has finally stopped in a small clearing up. She sits on a rock, looking suddenly exhausted. How I long to consume her. My stomach rumbles again.

"Baby," she coos. I start to lose my focus. The need to devour her is overpowering. I would have to be quick about it, and then make my way back to the river. I am disappointed that I am unable to savor the moment, but I smell the wolves closing in on us.

She is smiling at me as I approach her.

Perhaps I am right. Perhaps she wishes to die, as her child had.

I slide next to her, and her hand runs down my back. I begin to shift.

She screams.

No one is around to hear her.

No one, except those wolves.

The urge to leave has reached a fevered pitch, but hunger overtakes everything.

I sink my sharp teeth into her flesh, and my gnarly fingers grasp her arms tightly. A small squeal is the only sound she makes before the paralyzing poison I exude courses through her body.

I consume her quickly, ingesting her whole being in a matter of minutes. My hunger is satiated, but I am left with a certain dissatisfaction. The human woman had not tasted as I had expected. It was as though her blood had been tainted...

Dread slithers through my veins.

Something is wrong.

What has she done?

I begin to absorb her memories. I witness her giving birth to the girl. I feel her joy as I watch all the loving moments the two exchange.

Then, a cruise to Alaska. She is on the island, with her mate and the child. I experience her pain as she realizes the girl is missing.

Aughhh, I can hardly stand the searing grief that grips me.

My vision becomes blurred. Charlotte is her name. She stays on the island, but her mate leaves her. More horrible pain.

I see her working in a book shop, in the little town called Sitka. She always stays late. She pours through books, until one day...

"Kushtaka!" She hisses. She has discovered my secret.

Always she works late; looking for something else.

Searching for a way to kill me.

I hear her reading to herself aloud as she says the words, "*Magnesium carbo-nite*; that's it!"

Then, I see her looking at a reflection of herself. She speaks to her replica. "For you, baby." A look of determination is plastered on her face.

Then she smiles. I'm forced to watch her plan unfold as she sits on this rock, and lifts her hand to her lips. She uncorks a small vial, emptying the liquid into her mouth just moments before I find her. She coughs and sputters, but promptly regains her composure.

The compound begins to burn me from the inside out.

Fire. She knew what would destroy me, and in my haste to eat, I'd senselessly ingested it.

I thrash around, screeching in protest as a liquid inferno oozes through my rough skin, and singes my pores. Steam emits from my body, the smell of burning flesh filling the air around me.

I throw myself onto the ground, but the small patches of snow aren't enough to extinguish the searing pain. The river is too far away; I would never make it.

That atmosphere around me changes and I feel them before I see them. My demise has come. The growls make me quiver in fear. Slowly, I move my head to face the carnivorous yellow eyes staring back at me.

The pack descends; coming to finish the job. They smelled their meal from a mile away. They clamp down on my flesh, tearing my body apart.

It is not quick.

It is not painless.

I feel every excruciating bite as the fire inside me rages. The only small satisfaction I take is the fire being passed on to the wolves. I listen as they howl in pain.

The last thing I see before my eyes close for good, is an image of the human woman, Charlotte, embracing her child.

She had bested the Kushtaka at his own game.

This time, it is I who screams...

LEECH

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Appeared in Siren's Call Issue #8 Men In Horror

"But more wonderful than the lore of old men and the lore of books, is the secret lore of the ocean." - H.P. Lovecraft

Even now, safely tucked away in a bed at Dhaka's Central Hospital, the sound of running water reaching my ears is enough to throw me into a frenzied fit.

My body thrashes about as horrific images assault my mind, and within seconds, I am entangled in the crisp, white sheets. Machines monitoring my vitals beep loudly in protest as my hands fly protectively towards my throat, clawing at my windpipe in search of air.

I notice my left arm isn't working.

Then I remember. I no longer have a left arm, something horrible happened and I lost it.

Tears stream down my face as visions too far outside the realm of reality to be true rush at me, and I find myself yelling for her; calling her name even though I know she's dead.

"*Lyla! Oh, my God, Lyla!*" I choke back a guttural sob as the image of that abomination stripping away her flesh, just as one would peel a banana, refuses to leave my mind's eye. The twisted nightmares from our excursion to Bangladesh are etched into my memories forever. There is no escape. I will eternally relive my liquid nightmare whenever I hear the trickling of water, so I do the only thing I can do.

I scream...

Shouting erupts around me as a nurse rushes into my room, followed by a bulky orderly. The man forces me back down on the bed, restraining me, and my eyes widen fearfully at the sight of the syringe.

"No, no more!" I croak hoarsely. I know that if I close my eyes, I will see the hideous creature's milky eyes staring at me through the darkness while it's long, black tongue traces the features of Lyla's mangled face, just

before wrapping it around her eyeball. It siphons it right out of the socket, and chews on it like a child would chew on a jelly bean.

“Mr. Johnson.” The nurse’s voice soothes, trying to reassure me. “You have suffered a terrible ordeal. You are quite safe now, here at the Dhaka Hospital.”

Safe? Ha! I’m certain I’ll never be safe again. My molten prison awaits, and hysteria grips me as she taps the syringe for air bubbles just before sticking the needle into my remaining arm. They don’t understand. The monster will always be waiting for me.

Always lurking, just beneath the surface.

I pour every ounce of energy I can muster into staying awake, even as I feel the wave of warmth penetrating my veins, leaving the heavy burden of euphoria in its wake. I catch a glimpse of their exchanged looks of pity as my eyelids grow heavy. I struggle to stay lucid, desperate to differentiate my present reality with the abhorrent visions that torment me, but it’s useless, and soon I am dragged back under.

The problem, you see, is that those visions are memories.

Guilt consumes me, because I had invited Lyla to partner with me. I was eager to explore Bholat Dweep, the Island that had disappeared from the Bay of Bengal over 150 years ago, and then resurfaced suddenly as if it had never been gone. Locals would not go near it, which I chalked up to superstition.

“He’s lucky he did not bleed to death,” I hear the nurse say in a hushed tone.

“What happened to his arm, anyway?” The orderly, who sounded American, asks.

The woman’s voice seems to come from far away, and the last thing I hear before darkness welcomes me into its icy embrace is the nurse’s somber response.

“He cut it off, Rick. It was self-amputation...”

I find myself back on the small island, everything replaying like a terrifying movie. I see Lyla, but am unable to warn her of what awaits. All I’m able to do is watch...

“How does something like this *happen*, Evan?” Lyla is looking around in amazement as we stop to take more soil samples near the center of the island that had unexpectedly reappeared, baffling even the most respected scientists.

I shrug as I gather the sandy dirt with my trowel. Palm trees line our path, along with a variety of flora; over 200 plant species existing, impossibly untouched. Beauty surrounds us, and while not the least bit superstitious, a wave of unease has settled over me.

If only we had known, but we didn’t. We were not aware that we were intruding on something *else’s* home...

Lyla is walking slightly ahead of me across a piece of driftwood, using it as a makeshift bridge, when suddenly it cracks under her weight, and she falls into the clutches of the murky water beneath. Her head bobs above the surface, and I see her laughing. Even as I am baffled by the state of the water, relief fills me at the sight of her unharmed.

“*Well that stinks.*” She chuckles, grinning widely.

I smile back, but it quickly dissolves. I’m disturbed to see a black leech tethered to her cheek, and then, without warning, she’s pulled under by an unseen force.

Immediately, I dive in after her. As soon as I hit the water, I feel leeches attach themselves to my skin, draining my blood like parasites.

I struggle to resurface but something painfully sharp clamps onto my shoulder, before I’m pulled under and swallowed up by water. Everything dims, and my world goes dark.

An overwhelming stench of foulness, along with a rushing noise of what must be a waterfall, awaken me from my state of unconsciousness. Nauseous, I vomit what must be a gallon of disgusting brown fluid.

I find myself suspended slightly off the ground inside a damp cavern. My wrists are pinned above me, held in place by large rocks. To my dismay, my left arm seems broken, judging by its awkward angle. For some reason I am numb; I feel no physical pain. Even though my vision is blurred, I can just make out the slick, rough walls of my surroundings.

Above me I hear a drip, drip, drip, that must be runoff.

As I begin to come around, my gaze wanders to the ground beneath me, where I spot Lyla's mangled remains. My body heaves and convulses in distress, but nothing more comes up.

Some instinct from deep within cautions me to be silent, even though I want to scream and cry in distress.

Self-preservation.

I notice a cream colored mound standing out against the dark walls. At first, I wonder if it's some sort of undiscovered mineral, or perhaps an unusual boulder, but as my eyes adjust I realize it is something far more disturbing.

They are bones; a monstrous pile of bones in various sizes and shapes; some belonging to creatures of an amphibious nature.

I realize with a shudder others are human remains.

The stench lingering in the air reeks of death.

Further away, there is movement. I watch in horror as the shadowy image draws nearer. The outline is eerily humanoid, but as it turns sideways to discard a carcass of some dead sea animal, I notice a powerful looking, fin-like tail protruding from its backside. A sliver of light cuts through the darkness, and I catch a glimpse of smooth scale-like skin. The color is an iridescent shade of algae green.

Scientifically, I am fascinated. We know less about the oceans than we do about our own solar system. I speculate that the monster before me originated where the island itself disappeared to all those years ago.

Sensation slowly returns, my head is throbbing and it's hard to form a solid thought. How the hell am I going to make it out of here alive? The creature slithers over to poor Lyla's body and begins to devour what's left of her corpse.

Blood and guts stain the cavern floor, I can no longer hold back as panic overwhelms me. I scream and curse, and struggle to get free. The monstrosity turns to look at me with soulless white eyes. It opens its mouth and let's out something between a shriek and a growl, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth, a yellowish substance oozing out from between them. I conclude it must hold some anesthetic-like quality, which would account for the numbing effect.

Upon hearing slurping noises, a tightly clenched knot forms in my gullet. I try not to watch as it devours my dear friend.

I am, unfortunately, unable to divert my eyes, which is when I notice an even more disturbing feature. The creature before me is carrying two offspring, floating aloft in semi-translucent sacs filled with a murky green and yellow substance.

I'm certain I'm next.

The idea of a mother bird feeding its chicks comes unexpectedly to mind. I realize that I'm not here as food for the mother. I'm here to be substance for her offspring.

As if on cue, synchronizing with my terrifying train of thought, I hear bursting that sounds like water balloons hitting the ground and exploding. The carnivorous sea demon wails as she stretches out on the ground, in apparent discomfort as her newborns slide out of their sacks and latch onto their mother. I'm revolted to see that the little mutants already have teeth, and they greedily ingest the afterbirth. They are surprisingly large; already the size of a small child. They open their eyes and sniff at the air, using small slits where a human's nostrils would be.

The newborns open their silvery eyes and begin edging toward me.

Knowing my moment of escape was now or never, I am grateful the numbness in my limbs is ebbing, but the pain that replaces it is far from welcome. I flail wildly, attempting to free myself as the offspring close the distance.

The dripping in the cave seems to intensify, daring me to escape, so I thrash and scream madly, stopping only when I hear an ominous crack. My good arm pulls free, but the other is badly broken, dangling limply from the ledge above. White bone juts out of the skin, sending a shiver up my spine.

They are closer now, ever so close, and that damned dripping noise won't relinquish. My good arm drops to my side, and that's when I feel it. How could I have forgotten? I still have my Espada sheathed against my leg. I decide right then and there that I'm not going to die here. I have to live, for Lyla, and so the world will know about these sea demons.

That is, if anyone believes me.

I grab the knife, and do the unthinkable.

Barely flinching, I saw off my own appendage; cutting through muscle, tendons and bone. There must have been severe nerve damage because all I feel is mild pressure. Blood splatters my face as it spurts forth from my severed arm, and I quickly rip off the sleeve of my shirt, where my arm had been, and wrap it tightly around the stump. I turn just in time to

stab the first little beast right through the eye, puncturing the slimy flesh and digging savagely through to the brain tissue.

A shrill roar echoes through the cavern. Ignoring it, I kick the second creature hard as it nips at me, eager to sink its teeth into my flesh.

I leap at it, plunging my knife into its grotesque belly. It mews as green slime and dark crimson blood pours from its stomach, innards falling out as its body spasms in the wake of death.

An agonized shriek reaches my ears, and I feel a tinge of sorrow, just for a moment. The mother mourns her offspring even as she lay recovering.

A second wave of fear overcomes me as I wonder how I can finish off this fully grown specimen, who is larger than a man, with my small knife. As I make my way toward her, supporting myself against the cool cavern wall, I see the rage etched on her face.

Pure adrenaline courses through me as I rush the adult female. Before she can raise herself from the damp stone floor, I slice the knife across where I think her throat should be. Slimy blood gushes out like a geyser, and I am hoping I hit a main artery. I see a light some distance away, behind the dripping of the waterfall

I run frantically through the watery threshold.

The cave opens onto a sandy beach, where the small boat that brought us to the island awaits amidst the rocky shoreline. My memory fails me for what happened after that, but one thing remains.

That infernal dripping.

My eyes pop open at the sound of running water. Across the room, the sink is overflowing.

As the room fills, objects begin floating around me. I'm paralyzed with fear. It feels as if the walls are closing in on me.

"Nurse..." I manage to croak.

My right hand feels for the buzzer, and I press the button again and again. No one answers my pleas as the water continues rising.

A sliver of moonlight cuts through the window.

"Oh, dear God, no! It can't be, not here... no." Webbed talons dance beneath the surface, reaching for me.

All hope is lost; the menacing claw beckons me towards my watery grave.

So I do the only thing I can.

I scream...

ARCTIC WEAVER

*By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd & Suzie Lockhart
Appeared in Sirens Call December E-zine*

“What a wicked web we weave.”

“What the hell are we missing, Woody?” Joanna Rimes demanded furiously, fisting one hand and pounding it into the other.

As she combed the area behind the Winfield’s house with her deputy, Billy Woods, the shiver that ran through her wasn’t caused by the cold Alaskan air.

Two children had already vanished, and now the Winfield’s four year old boy had gone missing, too. Parents in the area were already frightened; Joanna feared this latest disappearance might send the town over the edge.

There had to be something they weren’t seeing. It wasn’t uncommon for people to go missing in Alaska, but three kids in two weeks?

Joanna’s thoughts were in overdrive. Dealing with children disappearing, watching the grief on their parent’s faces, only dredged up memories she’d tried to bury long ago.

“Wish I knew Jo, this all here just don’t make no sense. There’s no tracks, no nothing. The trail’s dead.”

Dead.

Dead like her little baby boy; dead like the children that disappeared would probably be if she didn’t find out what the hell was going on.

Joanna’s gut was twisting in a knot; she felt these weren’t just random disappearances. Someone was targeting children. A dark force was at play here.

Something sinister.

She pulled down her sunglasses to shield eyes that had suddenly gotten moist. During her years as Sherriff, Joanna had to be tough. She couldn’t afford to show any sign of weakness. The spurs on her boots crunched into a layer of ice now coating the light snow, which had fallen late yesterday. The morning sun was a faint white blur, rising against the dull gray Alaskan sky.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

Joanna’s gaze fell on the eight legged creature Woody pointed to. She detested spiders.

Woody bent down to get a better look. “Looks like an Orb Weaver.” He stood back up and stretched out his back. “Awful late in the year for it to be out here, yeah. Maybe there’s sumthin’ to all that global warming bullshit.”

“Humph.” Joanna lifted her boot and stomped it down to smash the spider, but her foot descended into a deep hole hidden underneath the sticky web. She fell on her behind and her leg twisted a bit, causing her to cry out.

Woody quickly came to her aide, grabbing her under the arms and pulling her up. She thanked him as she struggled to get the fine threads off of her boot.

“These kinda web’s are strong as Kevlar. Here, let me.” Woody flipped open his pocket knife and cut through, freeing her foot. Joanna rubbed her aching leg as she studied the hole.

“You okay there, Sherriff?” her deputy asked.

“I’m fine, Woody.” She pulled a flare out of her belt and tossed it down into the hole. As she did so, more creepy Orb Weavers scurried to the surface.

“Shit!” Joanna exclaimed, backing away.

Once they had dispersed, she walked back over and peered down into the deep pit. There appeared to be some kind of tunnel connected to it at the bottom. The circumference was just wide enough for a small child to slip through.

“Ain’t no way we can get down in there. Too many trees around. Plus, the ground is frozen hard.”

Joanna nodded. “Send out a call. I want the area behind the other children’s homes searched more thoroughly. Tell them to look for any of those damn Orb Weavers, and see if there are similar holes.” She’d gamble her next paycheck there would be.

“Right away, Sherriff.”

That’s when she saw it.

Joanna walked carefully around the opening, and grabbed a handful of spruce. She cut off a section and carefully placed it into an evidence bag. There was blood on that tree, and she would bet her life it belonged to the Winfield’s boy.

Woody was watching her as he dispatched the units, shaking his head. They had worked together a long time; she knew he was thinking the same thing.

Jo crunched through the frosty snow to where her truck was parked, on the side of the road. Woody trailed after her. She wanted a cigarette. For the first time in three years, she *really* wanted one.

Woody opened the back of his SUV and pulled out a tackle box. He unlatched it and flipped up the lid, then yanked out a musty old map.

“GPS’s don’t have all the answers,” he stated as he opened the map and spread it out on the hood of the truck. They both stared at it intently. All the cases were within a few miles of each other. Pulling a pen out of her pocket, she drew lines connecting them.

Where the lines bisected was an area near a military base rumored to have underground tunnels. Not far from her small hometown was the Caribou Pass, where men were always working on roads that never seemed to get done.

“Something’s down in those tunnels, and I believe whatever it is, it has something to do with the disappearances.”

Woody nodded his understanding. “You thinkin’ whatever’s down there is coming from somewhere close by, yeah?”

She paused for a moment. “In this harsh climate, there would have to be a center point for it to survive...” Joanna spun around to face her deputy.

“I’m going to take the ATV. You finish talking to the family. Okay.”

“I don’t like this here, Jo. It ain’t safe, what you’re planning.”

Joanna turned back to the map. Her eyes scanned the circle in the middle of the three points before settling on what she was looking for.

“What else do you know about those spiders, Woody?”

She tried to focus on what he was telling her; about the zig-zag webbing, and about the venom being a much smaller dose than the notorious Black Widow.

Even if they had something to do with the disappearances, their bites were virtually harmless to humans.

What would spiders have to do with missing children, anyway? She shook her head, trying to clear away the mental image of a giant spider that had suddenly manifested.

Whatever *was* down there, it was making its way to the surface...

“No one else is going missing under my watch, Woody. Spread the news that people should only go out if absolutely necessary, until I can find out just what the hell’s going on.”

“I don’t like this, Jo.”

“Neither do I, Woody. Neither do I.”

As the ATV sped towards the area Joanna had marked on the map, her thoughts were churning. Why were these spiders spinning webs over strange holes in the middle of an Alaskan winter? Certainly it couldn’t be the spiders themselves taking those kids. Could it?

A memory was fighting to surface in her mind.

She remembered the disappearance of a teenager a few years back.

Marvin something. He’d been camping with his father, and vanished without a trace.

There also had been rumors of people disappearing at the old military base, but it was never confirmed.

About two years ago, the facility had shut down abruptly.

A drab gray building came into view in the distance, surrounded by a tall metal gate. Jo sped up, her heart racing as the cold air whipped at her face, stinging her cheeks.

She’d brought her shotgun, just in case. Maybe she’d watched one to many horror flicks. She loved horror movies and scary TV shows; they seemed to take her mind off of more troubling thoughts.

Like the son she’d lost.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. That’s what the doctor had told her. Shortly thereafter, her marriage fell apart. She’d been alone ever since.

Her thoughts were violently interrupted as the vehicle spun out of control about 100 yards away from the military compound.

Joanna was flung out of the vehicle, landing with a thud on the ice.

“Augh!” Instinctively, she tucked and rolled, but Joanna hit the icy ground so hard that she felt a pop in her shoulder. Even worse than the excruciating pain was the fact that her shotgun flew across the slick terrain, far out of her reach.

Then Joanna heard it... she heard it before she saw it.

The sickening sound of ice cracking. She tried to scramble away as she saw the cracks shooting towards her.

Right before it began to give way, Joanna could've sworn she saw a giant web beneath the icy floor.

She wailed in excruciating pain; there was no time to react as the six hundred pound machine crashed through the layer of ice separating her from whatever lurked below. The cold shard she clung to began to crack, jutting sharply towards her, as though issuing a warning that it was going to swallow her up.

Her hands clawed desperately at the frozen tundra, but they couldn't find purchase. She could feel the pull of gravity on her body, as if it were beckoning her into the bowels of hell. Within seconds, she joined her ATV, falling into the black abyss below...

It was pain that yanked her back to consciousness.

The pain in her shoulder was horrific, and her right arm felt like lead.

Good thing she was left handed.

She tried to push up a little on her left elbow, only to be met with a stabbing feeling in her head.

Sliding back down, Joanna muttered, "Where am I?"

She shook her head, trying to shake loose the cobwebs muddling her thoughts.

The kids, Jo. You're trying to find the kids...

That was enough to jolt her upright, but stars danced in front of her eyes, and she felt nauseous.

"Augh..." Joanna leaned across her left side and vomited until there was nothing left.

How was she going to find the kids and get them out of here in her current condition? Briefly her mind registered a scurrying sound.

As the numbness in her body began to dissipate, and feeling returned, a creepy-crawly feeling began running up her legs.

She snatched one of the safety lights from her tactical belt and ripped open the green foil packet with her teeth.

It took a minute for her eyes to adjust as the white light illuminated the darkness. Her eyes widened in horror as what looked to be hundreds of

those eight-legged menaces scattered around her.

And on her!

Joanna jumped up, pain shooting through her body as she shook her whole body viciously, swatting at the spiders crawling all over her.

Oh, God! Some had found their way into her hair! She tore off her hat and loosened her ponytail. She combed her fingers frantically through her hair, pulling them out of her natural curls.

Joanna yelped when she felt the slight sting of their bites on her exposed skin.

She backed into the wall behind her, whimpering as she took in her surroundings. Jo watched fearfully, mesmerized as the small beasts moved down the walls surrounding her. They were moving away from her, into the blackness.

Then an overwhelmingly disturbing notion hit her. She would have to follow them.

Because wherever they were headed, was where she needed to be....

Jo gathered her bearings and reluctantly followed. She carried the flare with her, tucking it under her good arm as she drew her nine millimeter.

She almost didn't see the hole until it was too late. Regaining her footing just in time, the Sherriff dug her boots into the frozen earth and slid her gun into its holster. She took out another flare, shook it roughly until it emitted the fuzzy glow, then dropped it down. To her relief, the bottom only appeared to be a few feet down. Following the Orb Weavers as if in a trance, she slid down into the waiting darkness.

Her shoulder protested in agonizing pain, but she ignored it. She also ignored those hideous spiders; their beady eyes reflecting the light from her flare.

Claustrophobia was beginning to set in.

Once on solid ground again, Joanna scooped up the flare and hooked it on her belt. The spiders scurried down the narrow corridor in front of her. As they neared the end, Joanna noticed it began to get warmer. The air became sticky with humidity and, exhausted, she leaned against an old tank sticking out of the wall.

Why did the tank feel sticky and wet?

Joanna tried to back away, but found herself entangled.

Her body stuck to something like Velcro. It seemed the more she struggled, the tighter it got.

Dread oozed from every pore in her body as she came to the realization that the tank was blanketed by a giant spider web; the familiar zig-zag of the Orb Weavers taunting her.

An unnatural voice echoed through the darkness, turning dread to panic.

The voice hissed and gurgled as it spoke. "Theey lisssen to mee. Theey bring mee food."

"Who...who's there?"

"Foodd runn out. Soo weee play gamesss. Ffind ffoodd. Childen'sss easssist."

Joanna's head was reeling; this had to be some kind of sick joke. But, slowly, ever so slowly, a figure came into view.

She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt this was no joke.

The indistinct silhouette was male. He was the size of a teenager, but hideously deformed, with hunched shoulders and huge lumps under his flaky skin. Greenish puss seeped through, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth, exuding more of the garish goo.

"Oh, God, Marvin...?"

Something registered in his milky eyes. "I fell. Theey bit me allll up. But thennn took care off meee."

Marvin stepped aside, and Joanna's eyes fell on three human sized webs. Three small forms in the center were covered almost completely with the silvery threads, giving them the appearance of small coffins.

She shuddered, unable to hold back the hot tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Marvin was moving closer, spiders crawling freely over him. She struggled against the web. A giddy laugh escaped him; it sounded more like the guttural sound a dying animal would make.

Joanna noticed blood staining two of the small white coffins. She'd managed to keep her good hand free of the web, and she moved it slowly to her belt.

The third child was unscathed, and his uncovered head bobbed forward. The little Winfield boy.

Her concern was not for herself as Marvin dragged himself towards her.

Jo's hand was almost there, just a little further...

He was close, too close. She could smell the rot of death on him.

His jaw opened wide, almost like he unhinged it. His breath was hot, as misshapen, fanglike teeth bore down into the exposed flesh on her neck. Her body seized in agony as a shrill scream escaped her.

Joanna's fingers twitched violently, but she was finally able to clutch the handle of her pistol.

Bang!

Marvin fell lifelessly beside her. Half of him got caught up in the webbing. Orb Weavers swarmed over his body, consuming him.

Remembering what Woody had told her, she reached just a little further and gratefully grasped her pocket knife. She flicked it open and focused on slicing the web the way Woody had instructed.

She fell to her knees, tenderly reaching up to touch where she'd been bitten. Green puss surrounded her wound, sticking to her fingers. She doubled over and puked again.

She felt sick; venom was coursing through her veins.

Jo just wanted to close her eyes and rest. Just for a second.

Wait, she had to do something...?

The boy.

She crawled on her hands and knees to the web that held him. Using her knife again, she sliced through it until the boy was free. His lifeless form fell forward, small and pale as the snow outside.

Ignoring her own pain, she pounded on the boy's chest.

"Don't you die on me, too!" she cried.

She leaned over the boy, listening for a heartbeat. She breathed her own breath into the child, trying to resuscitate him.

She pumped his chest. "C'mon, baby, please don't be dead."

Tears fell freely, thoughts of her baby's death filling her head. Her precious little boy. He might have even looked like this child...

She hadn't seen Woody, and another officer, running down the corridor. He tried to get Jo away from the boy. She yanked her good arm free and pounded on the boy's chest again. "Breathe, dammit!"

Unconsciousness was nipping at her heels.

"I have a pulse!" The other cop exclaimed.

As darkness surrounded Joanna Rimes, she watched the Winfield boy come back to life.

“Now, you stay with me here, Jo! Jo!” Woody’s voice sounded far away.

A smile crossed her lips as she faded away. Was that her baby, just across that threshold?

“And I’m telling you, doc, that bite on the good Sheriff’s neck wasn’t from no damn spider!”

“Look, Deputy Woods. We found a large concentration of spider venom during the autopsy. That was the cause of death.”

Billy Woods sighed.

“I have other patients, Deputy. Particularly the boy you brought in, who nearly died from hypothermia.” The doctor’s tone was curt. “I’m truly sorry for your loss, but unless you can bring me the body of your mystery creature, I really must be leaving...”

THE MONSTER IN ME

By: Suzie and Bruce Lockhart

*Appeared in Bleed from Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing
"This one's for Terry, a loving soul gone to soon."*

Randall Bell stared up at the ceiling fan rotating slowly above his head, afraid to move. He allowed his eyes to roam around the unfamiliar area. Bright sunlight streamed through a window to his left, making little particles of dust visible as they floated in the air. The curtains on the window featured an apple pattern trimmed in a sickly green. A variety of herbs sat drying out on the window ledge. A horde of flies were buzzing around.

Randall slowly moved his head, his nose wrinkling from the strange, yet familiar, odor assaulting his nostrils, while he eyed the rest of the small, but tidy, kitchen. *Oh, God*, he thought, *please not again*.

What the stench was he could only guess at; he didn't plan on sticking around to find out. He sat up, checking to make sure he wasn't hurt before grabbing onto the edge of the kitchen counter and pulling himself to his feet. Silently, he padded over to the door further down on his left, resisting the urge to look at what undoubtedly would be a gruesome scene. He squinted against the brilliant sunshine as he quietly stepped out, holding one hand over his eyes. In the driveway Randall's vanilla-white SUV awaited, and he sighed in relief at the sight. At least he had his car. Reaching in the pocket of his suit, he discovered his car keys. Also inside his suit jacket was his cell phone. He took it out and turned away from the sun to check the screen. A surge of panic shot through him when he saw the date.

Randall Bell had just lost three days.

He couldn't remember a damn thing, except feeling that familiar tightening in his throat while drinking Irish whiskey at a local bar. A particularly tough case was finally over, and he'd been celebrating with his colleagues when he felt *it* rise up into his chest, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He coughed up blood into a napkin, and then excused himself.

Randall didn't attempt to recall what might've happened during the missing seventy some hours. His instincts assured him that the less he knew the better. Especially after what happened last time.

So instead he drove around until he came across a sign pointing towards the Pennsylvania Turnpike. To his dismay, he saw that he was about one hundred miles from his home near Harrisburg.

He pushed his SUV up to seventy miles per hour. He just wanted to get home and put this reoccurring nightmare behind him. Of course, he couldn't...not really, when vivid flashes of doing things, horrible things, permeated his thoughts.

Then there was the receipt for odd items he didn't remember buying, like Italian leather shoes and a hunting knife. What scared Randall the most were the things he'd read about in the papers. That was why he'd avoided hospitals; evidence. He was terrified of being connected to the crime scenes.

The sun continued to beat down so Randall cranked up the air conditioner. He felt the now familiar squirming sensation deep in his gut. He was about half way to his destination when . . .

"Ugh!" he groaned from the sudden pain in his intestines. He pulled into the Blue Mountain Service station and ran to the men's room. As Randall sat on the toilet, he bit his lip until it bled; due to the pain he was experiencing as whatever food he didn't recall eating was violently purged. Tears squeezed out from behind his eyelids, and he wondered if this was similar to the pain during childbirth.

If so, Randall now had a new respect for women.

He knew he would not make it home before another blackout hit. Randall grabbed some Tums and a pack of gum, asking at the checkout if anyone knew where the nearest hospital was.

It had been a dull afternoon at Blue Ridge Hospital when a handsome stranger in a rumpled, but expensive-looking, business suit walked up to the window of the nurse's office of the Emergency Room, breaking the monotony. Up to that point in her double shift, Michelle Dawson, R.N., had dealt with nothing out of the ordinary. A girl who drank too much at a fraternity party, a guy having some seriously nasty withdrawal from his crack pipe, and a little girl with a broken finger.

"Name?" She inquired pleasantly.

“Randall Bell.” As she looked up and the man moved closer, Michelle noticed his features appeared strained, and beads of sweat had formed on his brow.

“What can we help you with today, Mr. Bell? Are you running a fever?” She motioned for him to come inside her triage station. He sank down in a chair immediately, letting out a small grunt. Michelle pulled on a pair of purple nitrile gloves and took a thermometer out of a drawer, as a woman from the reception area joined them to ask the usual litany of questions. After slipping it inside the plastic sleeve, Michelle popped the thermometer in his mouth.

Upon hearing the beep, she saw that, indeed, Randall Bell was running a slight fever, 99.5.

She waited a little impatiently for the young girl to check his I.D. and insurance card. She hated when they asked for patient’s co-pays up front; a sick person shouldn’t have to go through that. Randall pulled a gold card out of his leather wallet and handed to the receptionist, who bustled away to get approval.

“Sorry about that.” Michelle preferred not to follow generally accepted protocol, because she felt a sick person should be seen by the triage nurse first. The ‘higher-ups’ didn’t like it, and she didn’t care. She was a good nurse, had been here in the E.R. for ten years now. “You’re running a bit of a temperature, Mr. Bell.” Michelle smiled at him. Even in his present state, he was a very nice looking man. “Would you please take off your suit jacket so I can get your blood pressure?”

He nodded and struggled out of the Copenhagen blue jacket that must’ve cost a pretty penny. She wondered what he did for a living. She’d felt the taunt muscles of his arm underneath his pale blue shirt when she strapped on the cuff.

Time to put a halt to the direction her thoughts were taking. She was supposed to be a professional, after all.

His blood pressure was definitely too high for a man of his age and physical condition and his pulse was rapid, as well. Her brows creased together.

“What is bothering you this evening, Mr. Bell?”

Randall Bell sat tight-lipped, unsure of how to tell this nice nurse exactly what his problem was. He cleared his throat. “I . . . I don’t know how to

explain this.” She would never believe him. Hell, he certainly didn’t want to believe it.

Except, he did. In one of those fragmented memories, he was looking in a mirror, but staring back at him was an evil, monstrous face.

“Try your best.” She encouraged. How unusual that such a successful looking gentleman could not articulate what, exactly, was wrong. Then again, most men *did* hate admitting *anything* was wrong. Hated doctors, period.

The nurse tending to him had a beautiful smile; Randall thought she was a few steps shy of looking like Halle Berry. A light citrus scent lingered on her honey skin. A fleeting thought ran through his mind; he wondered what had made her want to become a nurse.

“I’ve been in a lot of pain. I have trouble falling asleep. I . . .” Randall wondered how to explain the blackouts.

“I see. Tell me, where does it hurt?” Michelle asked.

He stared into eyes the color of amber, thick lashes curling around them. “All over.”

“Hmm, like a flu bug?”

He shook his head no, trying to convey his ailment without sounding totally off his rocker. “I have these blackouts. I wake up in strange places. It’s getting really bad, affecting my work.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m an attorney.” Randall Bell replied, hesitant to tell her he was the state’s prosecutor. This could be really bad for him. His career would be over.

Michelle’s eyes widened a bit. A bit of chemistry lingered in the air between them. He could feel it. But he could also feel . . .

“Ugh, ow!” Randall hollered out in pain, doubling over and clutching his stomach.

The nurse was hovering over him, and when the pain subsided, she wanted to check his abdomen. She helped him onto the examination table, asking him to lift his shirt.

Damn, Michelle thought, as she pressed gently on his rock-hard abs. Even her slight touch made him squirm and wince. “I’m sorry,” she murmured, right before coming across an odd lump. When she pressed on it, it moved. Shocked, she backed away just as Randall cried out.

“What . . . I mean, how long . . . ” Unexpectedly, she found *herself* at a loss for words.

Randall turned to look at her. Unwelcome tears were streaming down his cheeks from the agony. He had to tell her . . . had to tell somebody.

“I . . . I just lost three days. I need a surgeon to . . . to get out this monster that’s inside of me!”

Michelle stood shell-shocked for a moment. He had to be using the word monster as a metaphor. *Great*, she thought, *a super-hot guy comes in and he might be a nut case*. She took out a chart and began writing, trying to mask her disappointment, but at the same time wondering what the hell *was* in there, moving around.

“Um . . . okay, Mr. Bell. Can you elaborate? Tell me when this started. Please.”

“Several weeks ago.”

Michelle wasn’t sure she wanted to know more. He might be really ill, or really sick in the head. Either way, she decided to let the doctors sort it out.

“Okay, Mr. Bell. I’m going to send you right back to room 4B, and we’ll order some blood work and x-rays.” She attempted to keep her voice steady.

He lay back on the bed. “I’m not nuts. There really is a monster in, ugh, me.” It was apparent that Randall’s pain was getting worse. Michelle would talk to the E.R. doctor about giving him something to ease his discomfort.

She put her hand gently on his arm and tried to sound reassuring. “We’ll get this all figured out. Just try to take it easy.”

He winced again, briefly placing his hand over hers. “You’re very pretty, you know. Thank you.”

She patted his hand for a moment before pulling away uncertainly, and then she called for a wheelchair to take him back.

Randall hated emergency rooms. Who didn’t? The noise, the God-awful gowns, and the smells especially disgusted him. Of course, they weren’t as bad as what he’d smelled earlier at that strange house. He could hear doctors and nurses whispering outside his room. He knew they thought he was a nut case, but there was also concern that something was definitely amiss. The nurse had felt the damn thing move. Every time it shifted, the

pain was excruciating. A young man had come in to take blood about a half hour before. Randall had been left alone since.

“Mr. Bell?” An older nurse dressed in a traditional starched white dress, complete with the hat on her head, came bustling in. “We’re going to take you back for an MRI.”

Randall nodded. He could just imagine the look on the doctor’s face when the doctor saw what was inside of him.

He was asked the usual questions, including if he was allergic to iodine. They felt the contrast dye would help reveal what was going on.

“Where is the pain located?”

At the moment, it was still in his gut, but felt as though it was trying to make its way up into his chest. He circled the whole area with a finger. He was given a Dixie cup with 4 ounces of something comparable to cough syrup, but more disgusting, to drink.

A male technician named Tyler was waiting for him in a small, sterile room. The tech helped him onto a table, speaking to him in a calming tone of voice.

Randall wasn’t very comfortable; it was not made for a six foot tall man.

“We also need to add some contrast through your I.V.”

The dye seared through his veins and made him feel slightly nauseous.

“This won’t take long, Mr. Bell. Close your eyes and try to relax.” The machine began whirring and the table lifted slightly as it entered the giant donut hole. Tyler stood beside him, pressing a few buttons on the side of the donut, reassuring Randall that even though he would be in the small room off to the side, he would be able to hear and see him, in case there were any problems.

His arms dangled off the table above his head. The machine clicked as Randall was moved to and fro through the opening. The sound echoed around him infuriatingly.

He tried to remain still, but he couldn’t help crying out from the pain.

“Are you okay, Mr. Bell?” The irritatingly calm voice asked.

“Spectacular.” Sarcasm laced his tone.

The bed returned to its resting position, and Randall was helped into a wheelchair. God, how he hated all of this; being treated like some invalid.

“Augh!” He hollered, doubling over. Damn this thing!

As he was led back to 4B, Randall Bell could feel the nasty creature crawling around in him, scraping its claws against every fiber of his being,

as if it was trying to figure out just what made him tick.

He was emotionally and physically drained. What did that damned thing do when it forced Randall to black-out?

The pulsating entity was pushing its way up his esophagus again, and when he felt his throat tighten and the breath being knocked out of him, he tried to let out a terrified scream.

There was a flurry of activity as the doctor rushed in. Randall's throat looked swollen. He heard someone say through his haze of confusion, that they thought he was having an allergic reaction to the iodine. He tried gesturing with his hands, but they were busy shooting medication into him to counteract the reaction he wasn't even having.

Blood spewed from his mouth, splattering the doctor. Randall was howling in agony.

"Dilaudid. Stat!" The older nurse that had been there earlier handed the doctor a clean towel. A younger girl beside her hurried after the doctor, and came back within minutes, handing the older nurse a syringe.

"Mr. Bell, this is Dilaudid. It's for the pain."

Some relief would be nice. There was sincere concern etched on her wrinkled face. He wasn't aware that his eyes were bulging.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as a prickling sensation briefly overwhelmed him. Then a wave of warmth washed through him, and his body began to relax.

"There, there," the older nurse cooed at him as if he were a baby. At thirty-five, to her maybe he was. He was feeling fuzzy. *That dil . . . dila . . . whatever the hell it was, it was some good shit*, he thought. Even the monster seemed to settle. Randall wondered if the thing was just biding its time.

"Thank you," he murmured drowsily.

The nurse left the room, and the menace inside Randall Bell began to slither up his brain stem.

When he stood, Randall Bell was a little woozy at first. It took an extra minute or two to gather himself enough to get dressed. By the time he straightened his cuffs and tied the laces on his Italian shoes, he was perfectly fine.

Or, rather, *IT* was. Bell was sound asleep.

Hmmm, now where was that delicious nurse that had greeted him earlier? What was her name? Michelle something . . . ?

Two doctors stared at the films from Randall Bell's CT. Their logical minds not fully comprehending the images of the horrific face staring back at them.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

By: Suzie Lockhart

Appeared in Dark Moon Digest #10

“Revenge on Romance”

Moonlight glistened off the silver frost coating the bare branches of the surrounding trees. Elizabeth could sense him coming for her...

“Jo, get me a beer, would ya?”

Ignoring the sound of my husband’s plea, I continued to read. *The night was alive with his formidable presence. A cool breeze swirled around her body; the thin, silky gown she wore fluttering against her skin like a caress, making her shiver...*

“JoAnne, how ‘bout that beer? Game’s gonna start.”

Bob couldn’t see me glaring at him from behind, gritting my teeth.

It was difficult to keep the annoyance out of my voice as I replied, “Sure.”

Creasing the page of my latest romance novel, I set it on the coffee table. I slipped on my old Crocs and trudged reluctantly into the kitchen. I had just gotten to the best part; Mitchell was about to reveal to Elizabeth what he truly was.

Twisting the cap, I set the amber bottle in front of Bob.

“Thanks,” he mumbled absently, aiming the remote towards the television to click through the channels. I could not, for the life of me, understand what compelled men to need to know what was on every single channel.

I flopped back on the sofa, anxious to read what was going to happen next.

...and then his strong arms were wrapped around her waist, his lips dancing across her shoulder and brushing against the soft skin of her neck. Elizabeth moaned from the release of pleasure his mere touch ignited.

“Hey, Jo, how about fixing me a sandwich?”

Frustrated, I tossed my book onto the couch and headed back into the kitchen. If I could ever get a moment’s peace, it’d be a miracle. I pulled the

loaf of Italian bread from the pantry and made two sandwiches; one was never enough.

I handed Bob his sandwiches. He grabbed one off the plate and began stuffing it into his mouth, never taking his eyes off that flat screen TV.

"I have a confession, my love." Mitchell spun Elizabeth around, and she gasped as her eyes rested on his protruding fangs ...

"Would you get me another beer?"

Lord forbid Bob should actually ever move from that freakin' recliner. Still, I got up again and fetched his beer.

"I would never hurt you." Mitchell held her tightly against him, and he could feel her trembling. Even as he spoke the words, he was not certain he could keep his promise. The scent of her warm blood, rushing just beneath her pale skin, was almost more than he could bear. His fangs protruded painfully in protest.

The pages of the book were getting difficult to read, and I realized it was already getting dark outside.

Time to start supper. Romance and passion would have to be put on hold, once again.

I tossed leftover taco meat in the skillet, deciding to make chili. A stack of dishes in the sink beckoned me, so I turned on the hot water. As I ran the sponge over the plates, I wished I could feel like Elizabeth. I imagined a dark, mysterious lover sliding his hands around my waist...

"What's for supper?" Bob's voice spoiled my daydream.

"Chili." I swear, all he thought about these days was his stomach.

After serving up the meal, I sat at the dining room table with my bowl of chili, trying to read. Bob stayed on the recliner.

Click. Click. Click.

I thought about the satisfaction it would give me to take that remote and throw it at that television...

Click. Click. Click.

Annoyed, I announced, "I've got a headache. I'm going to lie down." I took my book and headed for the bedroom, looking forward to reading in peace.

Mitchell struggled with his salacious desire to rip Elizabeth's flesh open, so he could satisfy his craving for that sweet red nectar.

My eyelids became heavy, and sleep overcame me.

A loud crash in the living room startled me awake. The book fell off of my chest as I jumped up.

A cold chill hung in the air, so I wrapped my arms around myself before heading down the hallway.

Bob was asleep in the recliner, and the television set was shattered.

Wait. Bob wasn't asleep! He was...I gasped. Crimson liquid dripped from his neck.

A dark stranger stepped out of the shadows, from behind Bob's lifeless form. He licked my husband's blood from his lips.

"Your wish has come true, my love. We can finally be together."

FINDING MR. WRIGHT

By: Suzie Lockhart

Appeared in Siren's Call February eZine

"50 Shades of Horror"

Ominous clouds are moving rapidly across a darkening sky as I head towards my bus stop. I check my watch. I am late getting off work; I'm not going to make it in time.

Which means I'll have to wait another hour for the next bus.

A flash of lightening in the distance prompts my decision to take a shortcut. I dart into the alley behind the University's parking garage.

Usually, I avoid this shortcut, as the alleyway is always dark and deserted. The tall buildings surrounding it loom menacingly above me, blocking out a good portion of the remaining twilight. I'm sure it's my imagination when I hear taunting whispers in the wind tunneling down the narrow passage.

I pick up my pace when I hear footsteps approaching me from behind. My heart is racing with fear. I second guess my decision. After all, the police never did find whoever killed those students during my senior year. It had been horrible; their bodies turning up in dumpsters all around the city...

What if the killer is behind me, right now?

I reach into my purse, searching with one hand for my container of pepper spray, when a familiar voice reaches my ears.

"Ginger, is that you?"

The chill that runs up my spine has nothing to do with the approaching cold front. I whirl around to find Professor Joshua Wright standing a few feet away, grinning at me. I'd had an enormous crush on him during my time at college.

I probably wasn't the only one, either. He is so incredibly hot, with those piercing green eyes and that mass of coppery waves.

"Professor Wright!" The squeaky enthusiasm I hear in my voice makes heat crawl up my neck, so I'm thankful that my face is already stained red from the bitter February winds.

Chuckling, he suggests, “Why don’t you call me Josh now, Ginger. You’re not my student anymore.” His voice takes on a husky tone, making me wonder. Could feelings be mutual?

“*Well, this is unexpected.*” My Inner Voice exclaims, and moves her eyebrows up and down in a suggestive manner.

Unintentionally, I frown.

“I’m sorry, did I startle you?” he asks.

I quickly turn up the corners of my lips, forcing a smile. “A little. I thought someone was following me.”

“You can never be too careful.” The skyscrapers are now obstructing what little light remains. I shiver as he asks, “What brings you to the campus?”

“I was on my way home from work. I was afraid I might miss my bus.” Uncomfortable under the scrutiny of his penetrating gaze, I wrap my arms tightly around my torso, tugging at the sleeves of my jacket.

“So, you’re working in the area, Ginger?”

I blush a little again. “I snagged an internship at the city paper; guess they got tired of my pestering.”

“You always could be quite persistent, if memory serves.” His pale green eyes hold an odd expression that I can’t decipher.

We walk side by side to the main street, where a small coffee shop sits next to a book store.

“May I buy you a cup?” Josh nods towards the quaint building.

I had already missed the 5:45 bus, and there wouldn’t be another for fifty minutes.

“Sure,” I reply, sounding a little too breathless. My Inner Voice lets out an exasperated sigh. I want to stick my tongue out at her.

He pushes the door, holding it open for me. We enter the cozy little shop, the rich aroma of coffee filling my nostrils. Josh asks me what I’d like, so I order a tall vanilla latte.

“*Try not to sound overeager.*”

“Quiet,” I mutter under my breath as Josh’s long fingers wrap around our steaming cups.

“What was that?” he asks me as he turns around.

“Nothing.” Beaming up at him, I try to hide my irritation. I am wishing Inner Voice would shut the hell up.

We take a seat at one of the small, intimate tables, next to a fireplace with a mahogany mantle. The image of the blazing logs adds to the ambiance, but I gain no warmth from it.

I like that he pulls a chair out for me. When I'd been in his class, I often felt there might be a vibe between us. I didn't *think* it had all been in my head. One particular day; he'd petitioned me to stay after class. We were discussing an assignment when he'd covered my hand with his; assuring me I had a promising future in journalism.

After that, it seemed like he avoided me. I'd hoped it was because he was a consummate professional, and not due to any lack of interest. Besides, at that point, everyone was distracted by those campus murders.

Miss Inner Voice is going on about something, but I choose to ignore her as I hang on Josh's every word.

We talk for quite a while, and before I realize it, I miss the later bus. I glance nervously at my watch.

Josh notices. "Why don't you let me drive you home?"

"Really, I..."

A lightning bolt streaks through the dismal nightfall, illuminating the jutting towers of the church across the street. This silences my protests. Besides, what am I going to do? Walk home in the midst of a storm?

"A ride could be good." I couldn't dispute the obvious.

As we head back towards the garage, he grabs my hand. The contact sends little electric sparks through me.

We step inside the elevator, and it groans as it makes its way to the top floor. My heart is thumping wildly at the close proximity. He smells of pine and ice; it is a heady combination.

He keeps hold of my hand as we walk over to his small black sports car.

Instead of opening the door, he unexpectedly wraps his strong arms around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

"I may be out of line, Ginger, but I've thought about doing this ever since I first laid eyes on you."

"If he only knew what we've been thinking...."

I ignore my Inner Voice as Josh's lips descend on mine. When we pull apart, we are both breathing hard.

The air between us is filled with the type of tension resulting from long harbored feelings, and the ride to the West End seems to take an

eternity.

“Would you like to come up for a nightcap?” I ask when he stops in front of my modest apartment building. I feel a yearning radiating from deep within.

A sharp intake of his breath was all the answer I...we... needed.

I fumble with my keys before his long fingers envelope mine and easily slide the key into the lock.

For an instance, it's as if those sexy hands transform into claws, causing me to shudder.

“You're cold,” he breathes into my ear. “I'll have to warm you up.”

I am a ball of nerves as Inner Voice whispers, “*He could be the one.*”

“What?”

“Inside,” Josh commands. “You're freezing.”

Apparently, he's a little bossy. I'm not sure how I feel about this new revelation. He was never like that in class. I am confused by what Inner Voice has said. What does she mean? The one to marry? Could she mean... could he be the campus killer? What did she mean?

I am thrilled and terrified all at once.

Josh pushes me down on my sofa, slipping his hands eagerly under my t-shirt. The seductress inside me is busy doing a happy dance when my Inner Voice splashes cold water in my face.

And suddenly I realize that the three girls and one boy that had been murdered had all been Professor Wright's students at some point.

I push him away. He looks at me, puzzled. My mouth turns dry.

Flustered, I offer, “Would you like some wine?”

“Uh, sure,” he answers.

“*The knife.*”

I nod my understanding as I stumble into the kitchen. I begin rummaging through the fridge. I have an unopened bottle in there somewhere.

Before going back into the living room, I slip a knife out of my butcher's block and wrap it in a clean kitchen towel. I add a little something extra to his glass, just in case. Inner Voice indicates her approval.

I leave the towel on the coffee table as Josh takes the glass of wine I offer. He doesn't appear to have noticed my concealed weapon.

“I'm sorry, am I moving too fast?”

I offer a small smile as I slide next to him. “A little.” He drapes an arm over my shoulder as he sips the wine. His eyes take on a glassy look.

“He’s ready.”

“Can’t it wait?” I ask. Josh thinks I’m talking to him.

“But we’ve waited so long already, baby.” His words slur slightly. I reach for the towel, feeling for the handle of the knife.

“Yes, Professor, it has been a long time.” I agree.

“Now!” Inner voice demands.

I look into those green eyes one last time before I plunge the knife into his chest. His blood spurts all over me.

“Yes, Professor, you never can be too careful.” I feel sad as I watch the life drain out of him. I really did like him.

“Well done, Ginger.” Inner Voice manifests in front of me, smiling with satisfaction. She looks like a darker, shadowy version of myself. *“I’ll help you clean up this mess, and then we’ll get rid of the body. Just like the others.”*

SHADOW RAIN

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that.” - Martin Luther King Jr.

The bloodcurdling screams were what always pained Naveen Sonde the most; it made him feel helpless, worthless, to see his young wife in such agony.

It meant surrender; it meant he couldn't help his beloved Ava, even three months after sending that evil bastard, Davenport, to Death's icy embrace, and what Naveen hoped was an eternity spent in the fiery clutches of his own private hell.

It meant...it meant so many things, but most of all it meant that the murder had been in vain. It meant that scum of the earth, who had been his wife's own flesh and blood, could still hurt Ava, even after death.

He tenderly rocked her back and forth until the guttural wailing, mimicking the sound of a mortally wounded animal, died down.

Slowly Ava emerged from shadows of memories bathed in darkness, whimpering and crying softly. In contrast with the sunlight now peering through the rainclouds he could see passing outside their bedroom window, Naveen noticed tiny puddles of tears forming on his forearm. For his beloved, darkness was always there, lurking just beneath the surface.

Ava had never told Naveen all that had happened, and he didn't press her for details; he wasn't sure he wanted to know. However, he did know one thing for certain. The unspeakable evils that had been inflicted upon his wife were always perpetrated under the cloak of rain, because *that* was what always triggered the nightmare world she couldn't quite escape from.

Experts had urged him that getting Ava to talk about what happened to her as a child would help her cope, but he had a hard time seeing how that could possibly be true. His poor wife was forced to relive the harsh details every time there was a storm. Naveen would always lose her to that gateway of things unseen.

Her beautiful ocean blue eyes would become glassy, the pupils enlarging as that familiar veil of despair washed over her.

The ways in which he hated that vile monster for torturing Ava in body and mind were both numerous and uncountable.

“Damn.” He muttered under his breath as lightning once again lit up the horizon, and the floor vibrated underneath the plush carpeting as thunder rumbled nearby. Ava buried her head against his chest right before a torrential downpour began pelting the roof, each and every drop making her shudder. A scowl formed on Naveen’s face. He had checked the weather on their flat screen TV before coming to bed, and the damn weatherman had assured the viewing audience that the storms would miss their area.

“Shhh, you’re safe. I’m right here, darling. I’ve got you; you’re safe.” His voice still held the slightest hint of a foreign accent, even though his family had relocated to America when Naveen was just a small child. He continued to soothingly whisper the often recited mantra, hoping his words reached her ears as she traveled back to that dark realm.

He could feel her body tense back up, and the freshly manicured nails dug deeply into the flesh of his upper arm, drawing blood.

“No...” she pleaded with her ghostly perpetrator, her tone childlike and filled with trepidation. He waited for the inevitable, earsplitting scream. “No!” she wailed helplessly, thrashing wildly back and forth in his arms.

His jaw tightened as he held onto his wife, his teeth grinding roughly against one another. Naveen wished he could kill him all over again.

The storm passed, and the sharply injected nails began to recede, leaving blood droplets on the leg of Naveen’s gray sweatpants.

His wounds were superficial, but Ava’s deeply embedded scars were sliced open again and again, her damaged psyche coated in poisonous memories.

Naveen would always be there to try and ease her pain, until death do them part...

His family hadn’t been happy when he’d taken Ava as his bride. They did not care for her mixed race background, or the fact that she was Christian rather than Hindu. More so, however, they were troubled by the mental illness which had plagued his wife, even since before her Uncle’s vile deeds had robbed her of her innocence. They had been to several specialists in their few years of marriage, but it was always the same. Depression, anxiety, bipolar...no one knew, exactly.

He’d never even mentioned to his family that Ava’s mother had died from a drug overdose; that would’ve been the proverbial nail in the coffin.

It was true, though, that most people who spent a prolonged amount of time with her would eventually become aware there was something a bit off about his wife.

It didn't make things easy, to put it mildly. There were good days and bad, but the more time they spent with each other the more their love blossomed. People simply did not understand that Naveen cared for Ava more than anything on earth; she was the love of his life, the very reason for his existence. He had been an empty shell before Ava came along.

From the first time he laid eyes on her, he'd been enchanted. Ava was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen, with hair the color of a raven's wings and eyes that shimmered like light dancing across water; her features stood in stark contrast to her smooth chestnut skin. Her smile alone was enough to light up a room, and she embraced life with such vigor that it was contagious.

In his mind, his wife was a masterpiece of unequivocal grace, surpassing in beauty even the lovely paintings she created in her art class. Naveen knew in his heart Ava was his destiny.

That was why he killed Davenport. Naveen thought that if he eliminated the source of her anguish, it would bring Ava some level of comfort. The more time passed, the more Naveen came to wonder if it had been an act driven out of vengeance, rather than an act of passion.

Because killing Davenport had brought symbolic darkness to the doorstep of Naveen's *own* mind.

He was not a religious person, by any means, despite numerous attempts from his father, and even Ava, to persuade him to think differently. His wife had a deep and abiding faith. It was an aspect of her personality that he admired, yet also had trouble comprehending. He could not understand how the loving God she described could allow such vile, terrible deeds to take place?

Naveen's logical mind had always told him that there were no such supernatural deities, but what he had *felt* the night he'd killed Davenport caused him to wonder if there really was some otherworldly realm, if maybe human's really did carry souls.

Maybe soul wasn't just another word for conscience...

It angered him, and admittedly even scared him, to suddenly be uncertain as to what lied beyond the veil between life and death.

He wasn't aware of the other forces at play here; how could he be? Fate, destiny, providence, or karma, whatever you'd call it, all of these imposed upon time better spent enjoying life with Ava.

Of one thing Naveen was certain, the darkness didn't operate in happily ever-after's.

He gently coaxed his exhausted wife off of the floor and tucked her snugly under her favorite velvety blanket before heading to the bathroom to bandage his minor lacerations.

When the light flicked on, he jumped back in shock at the ghastly, wrinkled old face which appeared in the mirror.

Naveen had only seen the spectral image briefly, but he *had* seen it, of that he was positive. As he stared intently into the empty mirror, chills ran up each and every bone of his spine. Spots flashed in front of his face as he continued staring, and he felt the darkness emerge once more. As it pressed upon the threshold of his conscious mind, his head exploded with an unanticipated wave of pain that drove him to his knees. Then everything went dark.

Panicked, his arms flailed wildly in front of him as his hands attempted to find purchase. Something cold caused him to recoil in terror, until his vision slowly returned and he realized it was the base of the toilet.

Air.

Naveen needed air.

He silently padded past Ava's sleeping form to the sliding glass doors that led out to their small bedroom balcony. Grateful for the cool night air he leaned over the railing as bile rose in his throat. Concentrating on his wife's now steady breathing, he tried to shake the hideous face from his mind's eye.

Moonlight glistened off the treetops, newly glazed with a layer of wetness from the rainfall. The picturesque scene made him wish he could stay this way forever, just hearing her breathe, knowing she was safe.

A curious thought crept into the back of his mind.

Was *he* safe?

It wasn't necessarily his own personal safety that concerned him, but rather how his safety related to Ava. He needed to be there for her.

Again the night he confronted Davenport replayed in his thoughts, questions running at a rapid pace through his mind. Didn't that evil son-of-a-bitch deserve what he got?

One final thought lingered to plague Naveen, it was one he couldn't fully grasp the meaning of in his current state. This Black Death in him was not a figment of a guilty conscience; rather, it was a very real entity. It threatened to break his very core. Like ominous clouds on the edge of a dying horizon, it was biding its time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Perhaps it was waiting to sentence him to a realm of eternal sufferance.

Thus, one sinister question lingered.

Was Naveen Sonde a condemned man?

That sense of impending doom remained with him the next several days at work.

His job as a pharmacist at Masterson's Family Pharmacy was a constant reminder of what Naveen had done to Davenport, because he had used his job to gain easy access to what he needed to take the man's life.

It had been after a particularly difficult night with Ava that he began to ascertain, little at a time the supplies he needed.

A pill here, a syringe there...and after a few weeks, being ever so mindful of the watchful eye of the security camera, Naveen had gathered everything he needed to put an end to Davenport.

The evil piece of shit was in his mid-sixties, so Naveen hoped to make it look like Davenport had died of natural causes. He had to make sure his death could never be traced back to him. It would definitely bring an end to his career, and more than likely his marriage.

He couldn't fathom living without Ava.

One Saturday, after the drug store closed early, as it did every Saturday, he jumped into his SUV and headed to Davenport's house. The sleazebag had an easily traceable online profile, and Naveen was curious as to why the cops had not found cause to search for him. Ava would be at an art exhibition until six, leaving him two hours to enact his plan to make Davenport suffer for what he had done.

Twenty minutes later, he had located the residence, parked his vehicle two blocks away, pulled on a dark baseball cap, and headed to deal the monster the justice he so rightfully deserved.

The streets were deserted when he arrived at the small beige brick house, where he found no one home. The dirty bastard had made the mistake of leaving his door unlocked, so Naveen pulled on some nitrile gloves, took a quick glance over his shoulder, and slipped quietly inside.

Before preparing his special cocktail for Davenport, he did a quick inventory and found a variety of drugs stashed away in the pantry, behind a few boxes of cereal. As he looked at the labels on the bottles, he could imagine not all of these were for Davenport; a thought that made him cringe. This would, however, make Davenport's death look easily like an overdose.

It was time for someone to put an end to this lowlife once and for all.

Mere moments later a car rumbled into the rocky driveway and came screeching to a halt.

Naveen concealed himself in a small nook behind the kitchen cabinets and concentrated on controlling his breathing. The intense feeling of expectancy caused his hands to shake as he fiddled with the syringes, prepping them for use as tools of death. The first would cause immediate paralysis so Davenport wouldn't be able to scream, the second blinding him as the last of it pumped through his veins towards his wretched heart, which would seize painfully in his chest before the lethal combination killed him.

It would be an agonizing, yet just, death.

The sack of human garbage opened the door and waddled through the kitchen to meet his unsuspected demise. As he hoisted grocery bags onto the grimy counter, Davenport whistled cheerfully.

Fury gripped Naveen's lungs like a vice, momentarily knocking the wind out of him. The sound of his heart banging against his ribcage seemed to echo through the room, it felt like a rabid dog trying to escape its cage, fearing Davenport would discover him before he was ready.

Unaware of his presence, Davenport continued his merry whistling as he pulled a box of Lucky Charms from one of the bags and opened the pantry door. A nasty bodily odor assaulted Naveen's nostrils and he held his breath to keep from gagging.

The anticipation and putrid smell was enough to make him lightheaded, and he almost didn't have time to react as Davenport froze, noticing something amiss on the shelves where he placed the box.

In the nick of time Naveen pounced on his prey, jamming the first syringe roughly into the side of his thick, flabby neck. Davenport struggled

for a moment before inevitably succumbing to the effects of the toxins now spreading through his body.

The depraved piece of garbage fell with a thud onto the cheap linoleum floor.

Adrenaline pumped through Naveen as he loomed over the now immobile Davenport. He felt elated as fear crossed the face of the man he had hated for so long. Leaning against the counter, he passed the second syringe tauntingly between his fingers. He'd wanted Davenport to suffer, to know there was nothing he could do, death was at his doorstep.

He would get his wish.

Before Naveen made his next move, he reached into the pantry and grabbed a few of the bottles, opening them and scattering some of their contents. The fiend's eyes darted towards the pills, and then became mesmerized by the second syringe. Naveen removed his baseball cap, sweat drenching the brim of his hat and the collar of his cotton shirt.

He was feeling a bit shaky as he watched Davenport struggling to talk; all that came out was a gurgling sound while foam seeped out of the corners of his thick lips. He sat back on his haunches, leaning close to the sick pervert's ear.

"You'll never hurt another young girl, you depraved beast." As he straightened, tapping the last syringe, he seethed, "This is for Ava."

Bubbling saliva rolled down Davenport's cheeks, mingled with bloody tears.

Something Naveen remembered from a book he'd read unexpectedly came to mind. "How does that saying go? If you gaze into the abyss, it gazes into you? Your world is about to go dark. It will be a slow, painful, lonely way to die." He hissed as he slid the needle through the thick skin of his underarm.

One last remark punctuated all that Naveen had kept bottled up for so long.

"Oh, and Davenport. I hear it's supposed to storm in a few hours. You should still be alive to hear it."

As he left the reprehensible creature to die on the floor and headed towards the door, dark spots assaulted his vision, and he had to grab the counter for support. His head began to throb viciously. Naveen roughly yanked open the door, and proceeded to puke in some bushes outside. He

gulped in air as he shut the door behind him and began stumbling down the sidewalk towards his SUV.

As he walked his eyes kept darting about, a feeling of being watched stayed with him. He fumbled for his keys and sank gratefully into the leather seats of his vehicle. He started it up and began pulling away when a figure down the road a ways caught his eye. Suddenly, an old woman was right in front of him, and he slammed on the brakes.

Then for the first time everything went dark, and Naveen passed out.

Upon coming to, he saw he'd lost a few minutes in the dark void. His head was still pounding, but he jumped out of the vehicle to search for the old woman.

Even more unsettling than finding he had hit the elderly figure, was the fact not a soul was to be seen. Naveen hopped back into his SUV and sped away as if darkness itself was on his heels.

It was not the first time the ancient entity had observed Naveen Sonde, and it would not be the last.

One month passed, then two. In the interim, Davenport's body had been found three days after Naveen had put an end to him. It appeared everyone involved bought the overdose, especially after all the pictures discovered on his computer. It was assumed the man couldn't live with himself anymore, and, without further question, his body was lowered into the cold uninviting earth.

At first, Ava had been shocked. She had even sent Naveen to the brief viewing, just to be certain it was true. But, of course, Naveen already knew.

For a few weeks Ava improved, but before long the nightmares returned to provoke them both.

Even worse was the constant sense of unease that followed Naveen. It seemed to lurk around every corner, and his nights were plagued with dreams of being consumed by eternal darkness. He feared Ava would discover his transgression. How would she react?

What if he woke up screaming, like his precious wife did whenever it stormed?

It was several weeks later, when he was at work, that the discomfiting sensation tormenting him took on a stronger presence and suddenly made

his blood run icy cold. He had been waiting on a regular customer, Mr. Ames, trying to resolve a dispute with the insurance carrier over the price of one of the older man's litany of medications. He glanced up from his phone conversation and saw an ancient-looking woman, wearing a scarlet dress under a black coat, standing in back of the line. He attempted to avoid her gaze, but as he tried to focus on the call he swore her eyes were boring into his very soul.

His heart began banging against his chest wall, just like that night at Davenport's. He felt himself being magnetically drawn to her as though she was a manifestation of the darkness that had been taunting him. His head began to feel as though the blade of a saw was slicing right down the center of his brain, and he hunched over the counter as his vision became spotty and a wave of nausea overwhelmed him.

"Sir, are you there?" The voice on the other end of the line inquired. "I said, we can cover the generic version."

"Right," Naveen mumbled.

"My pills?" Mr. Ames complained gruffly.

Naveen pushed the plastic basket towards his assistant, Bill. "Is she still there?" he asked, gritting his teeth.

"Who? What's wrong, man?" Bill asked, concern in his voice.

"I...I need you to take over for a minute," he told his middle aged assistant as the man studied him over wire-rimmed glasses. "Been getting migraines." Everything around him was growing dim. He had to sit down before he blacked out again.

"Sure," Bill assured him as Mr. Ames continued to grumble. Naveen looked up at him briefly to tell him the generic version would be covered, when Naveen noticed the old mahogany-skinned woman had vanished. He knew he must be losing it.

As he rushed towards the back room, the chimes of the drug store door rang.

His head began easing up just before the shrieking of tires froze him in place, followed by a sickening crunch piercing the quiet of the pharmacy.

Naveen rushed over to the window, only to be met with a gruesome sight. Mr. Ames was lying face down in the parking lot, blood splattered all over his peach colored vest and beige slacks. His legs were twisted at a hideous angle, and the side of his head looked like someone had taken a baseball bat to a watermelon.

The place erupted into chaos as everyone shoved their way outside, people drawn to the macabre like moths to a flame. Bill was standing with his hand covering his mouth, stunned that he'd been in front of them a few moments ago. Naveen's body felt like it was going to collapse under its own weight... had it somehow been his fault?

Bill approached him hesitantly right after calling 911, then put his hand gently on Naveen's shoulder.

"You don't look so good, Boss. I can hold down the fort here, why don't you go home early? I'm sure I can answer...any questions the police might have."

Hearing ambulance sirens wailing in the distance, he couldn't help but agree. Bill was more than capable of taking over, and Naveen suddenly felt like leaving the scene as quickly as possible.

He was in shock.

And if he were honest with himself, more than a little scared.

The next day he could've sworn Mr. Ames blood was still staining the parking lot, even after it had been hosed away. Spots were still swimming in front of his eyes, and he felt like shit. Once again he had to leave early. Bill was chalking it up to grief, and making himself a mental note to ask for a raise soon.

The next few days passed in a blur. Ava's terrors appeared to be growing in intensity, and the stormy weather the prior few days had robbed him of a significant amount of sleep. Naveen couldn't have been more grateful when Friday evening finally arrived, a whole weekend off ahead of him. He swung by Ava's painting class after work to pick her up like usual. She was always delighted over his reaction to her latest creation, and today seeing her face lighting up with joy would help him get his mind off of the surreal week at the pharmacy.

To surprise her, he grabbed a bouquet of flowers from an elderly street vendor. Poor old gal probably needed the money...Naveen swung his head around. No, it wasn't her it couldn't be.

He really had to get a grip. Guilt must be playing tricks on his mind.

By the time he'd reached the small studio, he had shaken off all of his tormented thoughts and put on a bright smile for his lovely wife, whose face

was scrunched up with the intense look she only got while painting. *This* was the best therapy for Ava. He knew it was therapeutic for her, painting was her outlet, a world she could create lying at the tip of her paintbrush.

A world where none of the cards she'd been dealt mattered.

When she saw him, she threw her arms around him and stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek. He produced the flowers from behind his back, and she squealed with delight.

Together, they left arm in arm, and Ava pointed out various paintings hanging in the hallway.

A sold sticker was on a piece she'd created, and her eyes sparkled with elation.

Naveen was feeling better than he had in quite some time when he came across the soul-chilling painting of an old woman. The same woman from the other day, at the drug store. Now that he thought about it, he thought she was also the same one from that night, after Davenport...

"Darling, what's wrong?" Ava asked in alarm, as he stood staring at the portrait, the blood drained from his face.

He felt as if something was very wrong inside him, very wrong, indeed. The possibility that an evil manifestation had latched onto him the night he'd killed Davenport pulled on him as if he were a puppet, and some dark puppet master was yanking on the strings, twisting his soul.

It was trying desperately to drive him into madness, before its moment of opportunity was lost.

Ava's touch temporarily broke the spell, bringing him back from the edge of oblivion. He smiled autonomously, but it was not enough to mask his bewilderment.

"Naveen, you look like you've seen a ghost?" He didn't move for a moment, then tried to conceal all he was feeling before asking a question he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to.

"Did you paint this, my love? Because...it doesn't look like anything you've done."

"Goodness, no," she giggled. "My portraits aren't *that* good. Mrs. Anna Lee painted that, right before she passed."

"I see." He nodded somberly, "Did you know her?" Naveen inquired.

Ava shook her head. "I heard she couldn't take classes anymore because she had cancer, I think this was the last painting she did before... Naveen, what is it?" She insisted.

“She just... it’s just, she looks really familiar, but I can’t quite place her.”

Naveen hated lying to Ava, but he couldn’t tell her the truth. His answer seemed to appease her.

Upon arriving home, he kissed his wife deeply savoring every moment of contact between their skin, breathing her in.

The joyful bliss would only be temporary.

Lounging in bed with his beautiful wife Sunday morning, Naveen’s troubles were feeling diminished, until he received an urgent phone call from his mother. She explained tearfully that his father had suffered a massive heart attack, and had been rushed to the hospital. He was in critical condition, and the doctor advised the family be called in.

Naveen and Ava threw an overnight bag together and drove two hours to get to the hospital. The stench of death hung thick in the air as his father lay hooked up to life sustaining equipment, fighting for each breath. Seeing the strong, stern man in that condition made Naveen feel like a lost little boy. How could this have happened?

Something he could only describe as a black hole threatened to swallow him up. He could feel it buzzing around him; whatever this was, it was threatening him with a world of never-ending darkness.

He excused himself from the room and went in search of some ginger ale, to calm his already churning stomach when he caught flash of something in his peripheral vision.

It was her.

Away *she* went down the hallway, her elusive shadow lingering for a moment across from where he’d seen her.

No one else seemed to notice her. Why was she doing this to him? Every instinct urged him not to follow, warning bells blaring from somewhere deep inside. As he hurried after her, he found it odd a woman of her advanced years could move so quickly, it wasn’t natural. She cast a glance at Naveen over her shoulder, a look he determined to be indifference plastered on her weathered face.

He jogged down the hallway after her, but with every step he took, she seemed to move further away. Then, as if by magic, an elevator manifested in the pale green wall and she stepped inside. Just as he reached it, the doors sealed shut. Naveen stood stunned, watching the glowing buttons move down, one by one, until it reached the basement. The light

stopped for a moment before the wall pulsed, and with a tiny bleep another button appeared beneath the one for the basement. Then it all just disappeared.

Naveen was now convinced he was going nuts.

“Code Blue!” A loud voice boomed.

The headache crashed down on him like a ton of bricks, and he knew what was coming next.

He slid down with his back against the wall, his bottom reaching the cold floor just before he was plunged once again into nothingness.

Ava was the one who found him and told him gently that his father had died. The nurses were fussing over him, but he shrugged them off and rushed towards his father’s room in order to see for himself and comfort his mother.

His world felt like it was unraveling at the seams. Even though he and his father had had their differences, Naveen had always loved him. Even though the stubborn man didn’t speak to him for an entire year after his marriage.

The service the next day was short; a few elders spoke as lit candle flames cast an eerie glow over his deceased father’s pictured face. It was unsettling, and Naveen felt like he was going to be sick again. He barely held himself together until the service was over, and then he moved away from small crowd to find himself clinging to a stone rail in the courtyard out back.

Ava was suddenly at his side. She caressed his back and spoke softly, but Naveen couldn’t make out what she said. His head was buzzing again, it felt like his brain was going to burst apart. He clung to the rail while his eyes watered with salty tears that blurred his sight. He could not pass out again. He was becoming terrified that the next time he fell into that pit of oblivion, he might not return. Then what would become of Ava?

Not to mention his mother; Naveen was an only child, and now he was all she had left.

He knew she would miss his father terribly. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, but over the years Amrita had grown to love Rasheed Sonde. His mother had secretly supported Naveen marrying for love. She yearned for grandchildren, but due to Ava’s instability, they had held off.

As Naveen gazed over the courtyard, trying not to pass out, he could’ve sworn he saw *her* again. Who was this apparition that kept

haunting him? Every time she was around, it was as if she brought about a complete absence of light in her wake.

When he looked again, the courtyard was empty.

As the three of them drove to the house he'd grown up in, Naveen saw his mother wrap her wrinkled fingers around Ava's delicate hand. "He grew a secret fondness for you dear." Ava smiled that smile of hers, and it warmed his heart that she had offered to sit with Amrita in the back of the SUV.

His mother insisted they stay the night, which he had already planned to do. She cooked them both a traditional dinner, and normally he loved his mother's food, but tonight he picked at it absentmindedly. He was trying to build up the courage to ask his mother about the woman in red, and why she might've been at the hospital. If she was even real?

"Rita." It was a fond term of endearment for this woman he loved so much. "Was father friends with an older black woman?"

Ava looked up at him, shock in her eyes. He realized quickly how this could be misinterpreted as Amrita's features darkened.

"No, no, Rita, don't misunderstand. A very elderly woman, about eighty or ninety? A family friend, perhaps?"

His mother looked deep in thought for a moment, then shook her head as her chest heaved and she let out a little sob. "Why do you ask?"

"Nothing, Mother. Just someone I saw near father's room, at the hospital."

The rest of the night was tense, met with little conversation, before they all retired from the long, hard day. Ava was feeling sick from dinner and threw up in the bathroom. Embarrassed, she pleaded with Naveen not to mention it, as she did not wish to offend Rita.

"Of course," he assured her. After brushing her teeth, Ava returned to the bed in the guest room and questioned Naveen about the elderly woman.

Naveen was unable to offer a straight answer, since he wasn't sure himself if the woman was even real. But even Ava *had* seen the portrait with him. Not wanting to further burden the love of his life, he offered a halfhearted smile.

"She just looked familiar."

Ava's brows creased, and he realized he had offered the same explanation about the painting.

When they returned home, Ava received a letter in the mail saying someone wanted to buy her latest painting. The happiness that radiated from her almost made him feel like the darkness inside was blinded by the light in her eyes.

For a moment, he entertained the thought that life might return to normal.

He rushed home one evening after work as he watched ominous looking clouds rolling through the sky, he saw a lone figure in the middle of the road.

She beckoned him as a light drizzle began to fall, the moisture not touching the ancient woman. He was filled with an alien anger. She couldn't have him; he would not allow this darkness to take him. No, he would deal with this figment of broken psyche or apparition, and then she would leave him the hell alone.

In an instant she was gone and reappeared about a hundred yards down the winding road. He followed the game, playing cat and mouse.

Time itself seemed distorted as Naveen followed hypnotically through the pouring onslaught of rain that seemed to come out of nowhere till he pulled on a road of unwelcome recollection.

Before Naveen realized what was happening, his SUV was parked outside Davenport's deserted house.

He saw her arm outstretched as she stood in the front threshold, and knew deep within his essence she was waiting to settle the score with him, for taking Davenport's life.

He had to get home to Ava as soon as possible, but first he had to settle this.

The closer he got to the doorway the worse he felt, as if someone had reached inside him, phasing through his skin and squeezing his organs, contorting them painfully. His stomach was twisted in bloody knots as he walked past the for sale sign, creaking as it swung back and forth in the wind.

The thought of confronting this specter filled him with unspeakable dread. If the corrupted part of his soul could have licked its nonexistent lips it would have done so. He crossed the threshold and immediately felt weak, weak like he had so many times during the hard nights with Ava.

He collapsed into a nearby chair.

Flashes of Ava, alone in the storm, taunted him as his eyes lifted and met the dark stare of the woman in red.

“You’re here for me,” he stated simply.

“In a sense.” Her voice was raspy, crackling like a fire.

“Are you the devil?”

A look of amusement passed over her features. “Good Heaven’s, no.”

“Then what?”

“I’m *Death*, Naveen Rasheed Sonde.”

He vigorously shook his head in disbelief. “No, this can’t be real. You mean like the Grim Reaper, you can’t be serious?”

“I’m afraid I’m deadly serious.”

“You don’t look like death..” he said with minor certitude, the darkness pulsed hungrily awaiting the grand reveal. His body gave a small tremor in response.

“Men and their egos.” She exhaled a deep cold breath and the lights of the house turned a sickly dark blue as if in response.

Her pupils filled instantly, like a clear glass filling with black wine. Her hair turned from gray to stark white and grew all the way down to her feet. The leather coat changed into a long black cloak.

She’d morphed from an old woman to an elegant, entrancing creature of the night.

Her face had a bizarre paleness to it; she was beautiful, but her ambience held a skeletal quality to it that kept Naveen seated, as he tried to resist death’s seductive charm.

“I can’t die!” He insisted. “I can’t leave Ava alone!”

“You must, or it will be her life I’m forced to reap.” Her voice seemed double layered, as though two people were talking to him at once, the shadows in his soul waited earnestly.

Naveen looked wide-eyed at the entity before him. “No...” Even as he said the words, he felt like his mind was being drowned into a black pool of water. It threatened his conscience, his soul, his love for Ava, everything about him that ever was or is.

This blackness wanted so desperately to immerse Naveen, to know it wanted to bring about an end to his existence, it was the most horrifying thing he’d ever experienced.

Ironically *Death’s* voice is what brought him back to reality.

“You see, Naveen, the darkness you have been experiencing is and is not a place. Your soul is already tainted from the murder you committed. Even though we are both aware *why* you killed Davenport. The dark void is what your life would be without Ava.”

Naveen began sobbing at the truth of her statement.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked fearfully.

She moved nearer, floating with supernatural grace. “That is entirely up to you Naveen.”

Slowly she circled him, continuing to speak in riddles. “Even as *Death* I’m bound by certain rules, but when the conditions are perfect I can offer the redemption your everlasting soul so desperately seeks.”

“But you said my soul is tainted?”

“I can help you, Naveen..”

He was confused and distraught. “How can I be forgiven, in this life or the next?”

She looked disappointed, the long white mane swayed behind her. “Have you bothered to ask?”

“Ask for what?”

“Forgiveness...What happens when I die, what will happen to Ava?” he demanded.

“By sacrificing your life for her’s, you will redeem yourself, and you both will find peace, but again that is entirely up to you. I need your consent to intervene.”

Naveen was crying hard. “Of course. Of course I will give my life for her to have peace. But...but...I love her so much.”

“If I touch you our deal is sealed, are you sure?”

“Yes.” The word had barely left his mouth when he felt her ice-like hand rest upon his shoulder. “You will see her again, one day. Today, Naveen Sonde, your sacrifice has been a two for one.”

Her dark skin held an otherworldly radiance.

“What do you mean?” He faltered before he lost consciousness.

He awoke in his bed at home, unaware how he had gotten there. The pitter patter of raindrops pelted the window, and he sat straight up, looking at Ava’s side of the bed, hoping she would sleep through it.

Except she wasn't there...

His heart skipped a beat, panic overwhelming him. She'd hurt herself one time when he'd been asleep during an episode. She'd lost so much blood in such a short amount of time. Naveen couldn't handle that again, he would break.

He jumped up and saw that the bathroom light on at the end of the hall.

Please, he thought.

Not again.

Every movement was an effort, he wanted to run to the bathroom but haunted visions pushed him away.

"Ava!" He managed to croak out; he wanted to scream but his voice seemed lost. With painful degrees of heaviness, he turned the corner of the doorway, cringing. He readied himself for the worst.

Then he remembered...he'd made the deal.

Had it been just a dream?

Naveen was met with a much different scene. Ava was on the floor, but there was no blood. Her tear stained face was beaming as she looked up at him. In her hand was a little white stick with two pink lines in the tiny window.

"Ava." A single tear rolled down his cheek.

Her sweet face formed a smile he'd never seen before. "Naveen. We're going to have a baby!"

"Ava, I've been your therapist for the last five years. I know all your history. I'm not sure what to say? Here you are, in your last trimester, dealing with the recent loss of your young husband." Dr. Haney smiled at her a little uncertainly. "And yet you're looking more at peace than I've ever seen."

Never once had Ava been able to get through a session calmly when it began to rain, but here she was, one hand resting on her swollen stomach, the other on the window pane as she gazed out at the storm.

She had patients whose psyche broke over a lot less than that.

Ava felt the little baby boy inside her roll over.

“I know this sounds strange, but I know Naveen will always be with me. In fact, I feel like he’s watching over me even now.”

She turned and looked her therapist directly in the eyes.

“This baby is a gift. Naveen released me from all of my darkness, and left me with a little light inside.”

DEATH'S FINAL REQUEST

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Previously published in Tales of the Undead, Suffer Eternal Volume #2

"It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more." - Albus Dumbledore

You know not what I am. To say that I am death, and, therefore, simply the end of all things; is a statement which burns me to the core.

The All-Father granted me a name, so long ago.

In the beginning.

"Azreal."

I still tremble at the thought of the powerful force I felt, when the All-Father's breathe brought me into existence, into physical consciousness.

He'd taken away the energy of animals, in order to clothe the outcasts from the Garden. Out of their life-force, I was spawned.

Had I known what I know now, I would have begged for absolution.

I would have pleaded with Him, for a release from the bonds that would soon chain me to a life of turmoil, but, alas, I was oblivious to the consequences of my existence.

The All-Father explained that it was my purpose to send all energy back to Him. After the humans he had created ceased to exist on the Earth, a new life could be reestablished from the old life. And for a while my purpose was just.

I, Azreal, was a creation between an angel and a star

But the Millennia I've spent on earth have morphed my appearance into reverence and trepidation; I am no longer light, but rather a shining beacon of darkness.

I can attribute the beginning of my transformation to the first human death; the demise of the All-Father's most precious creations came from two brothers, Cain & Abel, the outcast's offspring.

I remember it clearly, as though it happened only moments ago. Cain lured his brother to the field and slayed Abel in cold blood.

My essence was yanked fiercely from my dwelling, where I had, until that moment, spent my days basking in the warmth of His light.

It had been so long since I felt that loving glow, and for an instant, I embodied Cain as he took his brother's life; I bore his hatred as he attacked

Able fiercely

Instantaneously, a horrible darkness formed inside me, threatening to crack the very light the All-Father had bestowed me with.

The All-Father's rage, however, at the affront to his very creations, reverberated through time itself.

The blackness that now controlled me had resulted from Cain; spilling his brother's blood, it pulsed deep within tearing at my essence.

It was a horrendous, vicious, never ending pain.

How could I endure this? I begged for relief from this agonizing pain, but the All-Father did not answer.

And then there came another...

The fallen one once referred to as the Morning Star.

His deep, ominous voice still taunts my mind, twisting and dementing it.

"Hello Azreal...", Morning Star hissed, his disturbing presence shook my abode, as if the Heaven's themselves protested against his being there.

I raised my face slowly to see him, this glorious Morning Star the All-Father had once treasured.

His appearance still makes my insides wrench.

Morning Star was much larger than I'd imagined. His skin was flaked, and his flesh held burns and deep cuts; marring features that must have once been bathed in perfection. Wings, which I had envisioned feathered as white as a swan's splendid tail, were instead grey. The edges were singed, and the bones were deformed and contorted, sticking out at both tips

What disturbed me most; however, were the heavenly chains that appeared melded with his body. I quivered as I imagined the agony they brought.

"Morning Star, dear God, what has happened to you?" I questioned hesitantly.

His face warped into madness, and his lips pulled back, stretching wide to reveal his pointed, bloody teeth.

"Exactly! Azreal! That's exactly what happened to me... your God." He spat as his expression turned grim, the dementedness vanishing as quickly as it came.

Briefly, I found my resilience. "The All-Father didn't do this to you, Morning Star, you did this to yourself." I had knowledge of Morning Star

rising up against the All-Father, and of his being cast out of the Heavens.

His voice transformed into an unnatural shriek, such as I had never heard.

“MY NAME IS LUCIFER!” He shook with rage. “And the One who did this to me is the same One who did this to you.”

His stare penetrated me. Black eyes that almost looked sad, as though he pitied me for my naivety. I could feel him mentally peeling back layers of my mind, clawing to find the darkness caged within...

“You and I have more in common than you’d like to think, Azreal.” Lucifer had begun to saunter around me as he continued. “I have a proposal, one that will ease you of your pain.”

My eyes widened at his divulgence. “The All-Father will surely release me.”

He spun around, spreading his hideous wings in a wide circle. “Ah! But He won’t, will He? How many times have you begged Him for remission? How many times have you pleaded for liberation, yet found no answer?”

The questions he posed stirred anger inside of me, and yet I felt truth in his accusations. I still had this pain; there appeared to be no relief.

“Where is He, then? It is I who heard you beg for mercy, is it not? It is I who heard you beg for emancipation. It is I who answered...not He?”

“So you have you come to my aide, Lucifer. Forgive me for asking, but what is it you want?”

A strained smile parted Lucifer’s parched lips as he answered.

“All things are energy, Azreal. That energy, which you now hold inside you, is of evil consequence. Its original intention was the transference of pure energy to your Lord.” I notice the emphasis on the word your, as though Lucifer is no longer part of the All-Father’s creation.

“The difficulty your Lord ran into is that his new creations are wicked, and unrepentant death spurs tainted energy. Thus, He cannot take it back unto Himself; He has no way of disposing of it. Which is why it remains trapped in your being...”

He paused, shaking his head in exaggerated empathy.

“So unfair. And it will only get worse. But, I have the power to solace the pain inside of you. I can rid you of it. I can take it unto myself, and I will continue to do so, as long as you allow me.”

“And what is the price I’ll pay, should I allow this?” I groaned at the stabbing sensations inside me, doubling me over.

“You owe me nothing. The dark energy you hold within is payment enough. I shall relieve this affliction you bear, each and every time you must do your bidding, brother.”

The agony had reached a boiling point, tearing at my insides. Lucifer had become blurry, and I fell helplessly to the ground.

“I need your answer now!” his ethereal voice boomed, shocking me back into focus.

All I could do is nod.

“Good.” his black tongue slithered over his lips as something shiny formed in his hand.

A scythe; I thought he was going to use it, in order to end me. The sky darkened as ominous clouds hastened around us. He took a powerful swing, just above my head.

My body gave a spasm, and released the excruciating pain, for the moment.

He handed me the scythe, and told me to use it to reap dark energy from the damned. The dark energy they held.

Then, I watched in trepidation as he dove back into the fiery pits of Hell, where he was destined to dwell for eternity.

However, a deal with the devil always comes with a price, and throughout the ages I discovered what that price is...

Lucifer had hoped if he gathered enough energy, he could break free of his chains and rise up against the All-Father, with new power. He has held onto festering vengeance; an all-consuming need for retribution.

And even after countless centuries of delivering on my promise, his power still paled in comparison to the All-Father’s.

His mind had become one of lunacy.

I couldn’t help but find slight satisfaction in the knowledge that it would never be enough. After all, Lucifer had deceived me, by his assurance he would ease my torment.

To ease does not mean to eliminate. The words he had uttered on that day had been deceitful.

The centuries of transferring malignant energy caused my form to morph into something ugly; almost skeletal like. I have cloaked myself in a dark, hooded robe to conceal my disfigurement.

My affliction lingers.

Numbed, but still ever-present.

My eternity seems doomed, and the thought of doing this forever makes me weary. My thoughts are continually interrupted as I'm transported to a deserted part of an obscure city, where a man is running from a group of people. He is shot in the back, the bullet piercing his flesh, rippling through him. He bleeds out on the ground, his time expiring quickly as the darkness remains trapped within.

I reap the energy, and then, yet again, I am yanked away, now to a dingy old basement. A depraved voice speaks with unnatural calmness to a small child, who is tied to a radiator.

"This will only hurt for a moment."

The child screams, and I am revolted at the sight of a pair of pliers in the man's dirty, pudgy hands. A heart attack has him dropping those pliers as he claws at his chest. Again, I do my duty.

My being is pulled in multiple different directions; fragments of horrific deaths fill my mind. Finally I'm brought to an old man lying in a hospital bed. He struggles for life, and is only breathing because of the machines he's hooked up to.

An oxygen mask covers his mouth, but his withered, leathery arms struggle with it, until finally he pulls it off his face.

Defeated eyes dart towards the wall, where machines that supported his life are plugged into the outlet. I swear he can see me.

"Please..." he pleads. Even as he requests relief, his bitterness is unyielding. He knows not what he is asking for.

The frail man finds enough strength to yank on the wires, once, twice; and it is on the third time that I reap for the final time.

I'd seen goodness done in this world, but as of late, the advancements in technology have created many more avenues for iniquities.

There are so many people in existence, and I am constantly being split into hundreds of different directions, all at once. There is so much death and misery...

I am beginning to lose conviction that the All-Father even hears the pleas of His children.

He hasn't heard mine...

I am beyond exhausted as I enter my humble domain. I can do this no longer. I am not surprised when I hear the rustle of wings, his vileness

precedes him.

I'd been holding on too long now. I expected he'd send one of his minions, but the air surrounding me recoils, assuring me he was here in person.

"Azreal, it's been so long."

I cringe at the sound of mockery in his voice. Intense pain and fatigue radiate through me, causing me difficulty to remain in any position too long.

I remain silent.

"Why has it been so long since your last deliverance? Why are you here, wasting time? There is much more of my energy to reap."

I scoff at his words. During my thousands of years, the humans had begun to refer to me as the Grim Reaper.

"Your energy?" I scoff.

He frowns at my comments, "I did not come here to squabble."

Lucifer's features had become more distorted and heinous over time, and his tattered wings, along with the fragmented bones, had the appearance of burned charcoal.

"No, of course not. I'm sure you're just here to make certain I uphold my end of our deal." There is indignation in my tone as a newfound energy awakens within me.

Lucifer, however, wasn't pleased with my current course of action. His vile wings somehow manage to lift him up, sending tremors through the air.

"How dare you!" he screeches. "We had a deal!" Then, "Fine, enjoy the horrific pain you will now endure, forever!"

Now it is my turn to take to the air. I do not have wings, but the design of creation the All-Father had instilled in me allows me this. I ponder my next move for a moment, even as an undeniable rage courses through every pore of my being.

"No, Lucifer, I'm afraid you do need me, or no more energy." I pull back my hood revealing horrific features that even Lucifer cringes at, I call his bluff. "Without it, how will you ever rise up against the All-Father?"

He glares at me coldly, and his enormous wingspan lands him crookedly back on the ground. I wonder if my appearance even disturbs the devil himself?

"What is it you want, Azreal?"

The unnatural voice that comes out of my mouth doesn't sound like me. "Nothing you can give me, Lucifer." My tone defies him with every word.

"Tread cautiously, Azreal." He threatens.

"I want absolution, only One can deliver me." I tremble at the forcefulness of my own voice, looking to the scythe he'd given me so long ago.

After the endless amount of death, carnage, and evil I've been forced to witness on earth, I feel my hand reach for the cold metal one last time.

"Ah now we've come to our senses." Lucifer claps his hands together, discolored nails tipping his gnarled fingers.

My own skeletal fingers wrap around the sinister weapon, "Yes we have."

And then, as if he sees it before it happens, Lucifer leaves the ground with tremendous speed and charges towards me.

"No!" He wails, but it's already too late; the demonic steel plunges through my core.

As my being slowly fades, I don't know what the consequences will be.

To humankind.

To myself.

If my days will be spent fighting Lucifer, in the bowels of Hell, so be it.

I feel a pang of guilt at disappointing the All-Father, just before my being is no more...

Darkness becomes my chasm, until dreadful images begin to explode around me. I see the All-Father's plan unfold; all along His purpose for me had been to bring about the end times.

I did not know it, but Lucifer had bought mankind many more years, even though his only chance at freedom was their demise.

The world erupted into flames and chaos. I bear witness to Lucifer rising against an army of angels, with his army of demons.

Heavenly figures plunge into the earth as ethereal screams fill the air. And yet my resentment for the All-Father disappears, and I come to understand the burden He must bear to every sin His creations commit.

The darkness around me begins to dissipate, and a light so bright it could illuminate the universe fills my every pore; it restores my former

glory, and I watch in melancholy as the world comes to an end.

INSTINCT

By: Suzie Lockhart

*Appeared in **Frighmare's, A Fistful of Flash Fiction**
"Blood is thicker than water"*

Zenia woke to sunbeams cutting through cracks in the boards nailed to the windows. The brilliant rays illuminated the dust, and just looking at them made her sneeze. She rubbed her eyes to clear away sleep, and rolled onto her side.

An excruciating pain shot through her left arm. In order to keep from crying out, she bit down on her bottom lip until she drew blood. The coppery flavor actually tasted good on her tongue, as she licked it across the open wound.

She glanced around to be certain everyone else was asleep. They were spread out all over the wood floor, but no one else was awake. Yet.

Slowly, she rolled up her sleeve to check the scratch. Green ooze seeped out of it. She grabbed a strip of cloth from her backpack and wrapped it tightly around her arm, and then slid her sleeve back down to conceal the wound.

The survival instinct was already kicking in. She knew she should wake Carson up and ask him to shoot her, while she still could be easily killed.

But she knew she wouldn't.

She leaned against the cold brick wall, trying to think, but her ability to reason was quickly abandoning her. She looked around at the dozen or so people that had become her family during their fight for survival. What would happen to them, if she didn't get the hell out of here?

For some, it would be the same thing that was happening to her right now.

For others . . .

Her gut clenched; the revolting, burning need already settling in the pit of her stomach. The air even smelled different, savory, evoking memories of roasting hot dogs over a campfire, with her parents.

That was before the world had changed. Before the biological weapon, developed overseas, had accidentally been let loose. Before it had

spread at an unbelievable rate, changing people into monsters that fed off of everyone.

And they were not easily killed once the transformation was complete.

Zenia felt saliva escape through her lips, and she coughed.

“Are you okay?” Tina, her sister, murmured.

Zenia kept her voice low. “Just go. It’s daylight now. Get to a safe place before dark.” Her emotions were quickly dissolving.

Tina—the only thing she had left.

She clung desperately to her last shred of humanity.

Her sister looked into her red-rimmed eyes and let out a bloodcurdling scream. Everyone woke up, and the room exploded into mass mayhem.

Unable to fight it any longer, Zenia snatched one of the men with her newfound strength.

She sank her teeth into his flesh, feeling a distant satisfaction as she watched Tina run out into the daylight.

Then, her humanity disappeared forever.

BURN BABY BURN

By: Bruce Lockhart 2nd

“To Hell and back again.”

The stench of his burnt flesh mingled with the singed skin of the other victims, filling the chambers as it permeated the air with its noxious odor. It was absolutely suffocating.

Moans of agony and despair resonated through the corridors as hundreds of evil souls paid their penance.

Mason McAlester was in hell...

In life, he had been one of those evil souls; he'd done sick, vile things during his life, and this was his retribution. He looked down at the rack where sharp hooks and blades pierced his decaying flesh, cutting and slicing what was left of his insides. He hung there, feeling like a scorched and bleeding scarecrow as he waited for the *one* he'd come to know as his tormentor.

Niac took cruel to a new level; something between a Warden and a Bounty Hunter, he reveled in collecting and torturing souls for *Lucifer*.

Slowly, the web of blades receded into the wall behind him, dropping Mason roughly to the ground.

His wounds healed as if by magic, but only enough so he could stand to be tortured all over again. Puss-filled blisters from the acrid heat, popping and sizzling on the surface of his charred flesh.

He yearned to escape, but even if he could, by some miracle, find a way out, moving was much too difficult a task.

Mason was dead in all aspects of the word; weak, broken, and beyond exhaustion. How long had he been here? How many days, months, or years had Niac punished him; slicing, sawing and burning until he left Mason broken...leaving him with no alternative but to accept his doomed fate?

Footsteps could be heard, echoing through his eardrums like a church bell at point blank range as they neared his chamber. It was the kind of loud that drowned out everything else.

Please, he thought, *not Niac*. Even while he doubted there was anything more he could do, fear gripped what was left of him. Niac always

seemed to have some new form of torture, just when Mason thought the sinister being had damaged him beyond repair.

He didn't have the will to look his torturer in his cold empty eyes.

So he let his malnourished body lay limp, playing possum. Instead of the usual black cobra boots Niac wore, a pair of dirty feet appeared in front of him. Mason risked a glance, and stared in disbelief at the ancient figure standing before him. This was clearly not Niac, yet he felt uneasy over the man's sudden appearance.

"Up! Hurry! Get up before they come back!"

Racked with pain, he raised his hand and feebly tried to wave the old man away. The old coot was clearly insane; he'd been here far too long.

"We can escape!" he urged in a hushed tone. "Now get up."

"Why me?" He managed to grunt out as he rose to his knees.

"You are the freshest soul in this area."

"How long?" Mason asked through a fit of coughs.

"Why, you've only been here a day or so. Time is different down here..."

"Feels like years." He muttered, more to himself than to the old man in rags, who was now pulling him up underneath his arms. Mason growled, shaking as standing up brought fresh waves of pain.

A horrible tingling sensation ran up and down his legs, and he wobbled like a baby standing for the very first time. Teetering, he almost fell. No, he couldn't fall. Hitting that rocky floor would be excruciating, so slowly, he stretched his muscles and cracked his bones.

It felt good to stand. It made him feel whole again, if only for a second.

The old man was already down at the far end of the prison, searching the ragged wall for something. Mason passed by miserable souls trapped in various torture devices, including ones similar to the rack he'd been suspended on. They wailed for help, and, truth be told, Mason relished the sound of screams. Just not his own. If this nutter could get him out of here, well, he could care less what happened to all the rest.

Mason pondered how this old fellow had managed to escape.

"Who are you?"

The old man grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the stone wall, "My name is Cain. Now hurry! Touch it, quickly!"

Mason didn't have time to process everything as he placed his hand on the hot stone wall that was to be his eternal prison.

Instantly he felt a sharp, static pain radiate from his hand and spreading through his entire body. He stumbled back as his hand smoldered. The sound of hundreds of mechanisms clicking behind the colossal wall sounded like a chorus of metal crickets.

The wall rearranged itself, like some kind of bizarre open-sesame weird shit, making a doorway just large enough for him and his accomplice to squeeze through. A dark path revealed itself. It was impossible to see how far back the trail went. A wisp of a cool breeze sneaked through the sweltering heat, enticing him with the promise of freedom.

Flailing hands groped at their ankles as they fled. Mason let out a shriek as he followed closely behind Cain. A fleeting thought of two brothers in the Bible, from a Sunday school class he'd once been forced to endure, skirted his thoughts. Surely, it couldn't be...?

He did his best to avert Cain's eyes, uncomfortable with the memory. It had been a particularly awful time in his life. Light near the end beckoned the men towards freedom. Cain pushed him gruffly through the otherworldly portal. The wall could be heard slamming shut in the distance, sealing them off from the tortures of hell.

The complete absence of light surrounded them, leaving a hazy, unwelcoming aura in its wake.

"Where are we?" he asked through chattering teeth. He could feel the old man's eyes on him, even in this unlit void.

"Think of it as a back door to purgatory. Now, quickly, we need to go before they send the hounds."

Mason shuddered. He'd always hated dogs, and those hellhounds embodied the worst of the worst. Cain's feet shuffle across the cold floor, slowly coming to a trot.

"Hurry!" he hissed.

Mason tried to follow, but it was as if someone had him in a hypnotic state. He managed to look back for only a moment, and was met with such a terrifying sight that it sent a fiery shiver all the way up his spine, making his feet stick to the floor like two cement blocks.

The walls burst open to reveal the flaming abyss hidden behind, and two huge, hellish creatures leapt out, the same way tigers jump through a ring of fire at the circus.

The hounds were giant black abominations, their fangs jutting out at grotesquely odd angles. Their eyes were the color of blood, and their claws reminded Mason of the large sized kitchen knives he'd often used during his *playtime*.

As the temporary glow of flames pirouetted against the shadowy walls, their dim light revealed that Cain was long gone. Then, the worst possible thing happened...

Niac stepped through the opening, a vile grimace dancing on his lips. Their eyes locked for a moment before the portal closed, returning the void where Mason stood frozen back into eternal darkness. The hounds howled.

Niac let out an ethereal shriek. "Sick 'em, boys!"

Mason ran blindly forward, as fast as his legs would carry him. When he brushed against a wall, he searched frantically with his hands for a way out. He could hear them snarling and growling behind him, could practically feel their hot breath on his heels.

Heavy paws sent tremors vibrating through the floor. All at once, the walls began to shift around, morphing into some sort of labyrinth. He felt one of the hound's breath on his neck just before he was shoved forward violently by one of the changing walls.

The hellhound snapped its jaw, clipping Mason on the shoulder before they were separated by the imposing structure. He tumbled out of the maze onto a soft, inviting lawn.

Mason ran his hands over the glorious grass. It smelled freshly cut; it was an amazing scent and he inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the clean air.

He looked around him, memories swirling around him at the sight of the familiar place. It seemed as if he'd been there only yesterday. In front of him was the beautiful old farmhouse he grew up in. Before they'd be forced to move.

His favorite Louisville slugger rested against the wrap-a-round porch, beckoning to him. He picked it up, caressing it as fond recollections of bashing in the heads of chickens filled his thoughts. With childlike excitement he began swinging it, like he had so many times before bringing it down on the skulls of feathery little creatures.

He basked in the memory of when his parents had bought it for him, back when they'd loved him. His joy was cut short as Cain's voice came out of nowhere, interrupting his moment. "We've got to go, Mason."

“Where the hell did you go, you bastard? You left me!?” He accused, clenching the baseball bat tightly in his hand, furious that his moment of pleasure had been abruptly snatched away.

A heavy fog settled in, as if responding to his emotional state.

“Ha! Don’t blame me. I’m the one who got you out of there when those hounds came, Mason!”

He glowered at Cain, but the bite on his back began to sting something awful, and as a wave of pain washed over him, he stumbled.

“Whoa, whoa. Easy, I’ve got you.” Cain hurried over, helping him walk towards his house of forgotten memories. “That’s a nasty bite.”

Cain helped him inside, bandaged him up with some gauze from the bathroom, as the whole time Mason held on tightly to the slugger. Remembering how it felt to have bone crushed under weight of his bat, contemplating how it would feel again...

Mason had always been a bad seed.

Cain sat down across from him, eyeing him warily. “Let me make something perfectly clear. When we get out of here, that’s the end of it. I don’t know what you did to end up down there, but I never want to see you again, got it?”

Mason was barely listening. He felt rejuvenated. Oh, how he would relish returning to the unsuspecting public, making them tremble in fear once again, clinging to their worthless lives until he struck.

This Cain character would be his first victim.

He smiled that boyish crooked smile of his. It was a deceptively dangerous grin. White knuckles clenched the bat. “Got it.”

Just as he pictured bludgeoning Cain to death, the windows of the house shattered, sending glass everywhere. The terrible roar of what had to be the hellhound made his ears bleed. It was a nauseating sound, different than their usual howls, unsettling Mason’s equilibrium. He was dizzy as bile rose up his throat. The hound bound easily through the broken window.

It came directly for Mason, and instinctively he drew back the bat with all his might, slamming it viciously into the temple of the hell-forged creature. It stumbled, stunned at the sudden impact.

With less speed than the first time, it charged him again. Mason raised the bat overhead and brought it down forcefully on the cranium of the huge canine. It fell down, collapsing on the floor and letting out a pathetic whimper.

Mason grinned at his success, and then he brought the bat down onto the skull of the unconscious dog over and over again, laughing madly as he bludgeoned it. Blood, brain, and bone splattered everywhere.

When he finally stopped, he realized Cain had been sitting there, calmly watching the psychotic episode. His face contorted... into something Mason should know?

For a second the old man's face held a cautious familiarity.

He uttered one word. "Finished?" Before turning to leave. Mason's grin died and he followed him outside.

It had grown disturbingly quiet as Mason opened the screen door, like he'd done so many times before. An eerie coldness had come with the lingering fog, engulfing Mason.

He could see his breath, but that was all he could see. The thick fog was up to his forehead. He swiped at it like someone caught in a net, calling out to his unseen partner. "Cain?"

A whisper in his ear startled him, and if he wasn't already dead, he would have had a heart attack. "Close."

Mason whipped his body around and swung the Louisville slugger where he hoped Niac's head was.

He would have hit him, too, but Niac caught the bat easily with a supernatural strength. Slowly, heat radiated from his hand, causing the tip of the bat to smolder an omen-like red.

It reminded him of the chambers back in hell.

Mason had become mesmerized by its gleam. Only when the heat became unbearable did he snatch his hand away. The smell of burnt flesh was also a memento of what awaited him if Niac dragged him back into Hell.

"No! I won't go back!" he screamed, running lost and scared through the heavy fog.

It was as if Niac's voice was inside his head; he could hear him everywhere.

"Where will you go Mason? Back home?" The demon laughed callously.

"Shut up!"

Mason wheezed. Both lungs felt like a rat was trapped inside, trying to claw its way out.

A rat in a cage.

“Your folks didn’t want you, once they found out who you really were.” Niac taunted. “ They gave up on you a long time ago.”

Still Mason ran, trying to escape Niac, but more so trying to escape those horrible memories. Flashes of the chamber could be seen in Mason’s peripheral, like red death peering through the fog.

Niac continued his mental persecution.

“I mean, honestly, they wanted you to get the chair, too. All those kids you killed?! Tsk, tsk. Personally, I’m surprised they weren’t there to watch you fry.”

Mason slipped and fell to the ground. Hot pain seared through his veins. He was dying all over again, blood pouring through his pores like someone had poked holes all over his skin.

Suddenly the fog dissipated, revealing the membrane of Hell beneath the illusion.

“What? Cain helped me...”

A dead laugh echoed through the chambers, the familiar background noise of pure despair settling in.

“Seriously? Not the brightest crayon in the box, are we?”

His black cobra boots stopped in front of Mason, and he kicked.

“Let me spell it out for you, you stupid little rodent. Cain and Niac are one in the same, I am him, and he is me.”

Mason watched, terrified as his personal devil’s face contorted into the old man’s. Niac... Cain spelled backwards...

“You never left, Mason, and you never will.”

“Fuck you!” He cried, even as his tears wouldn’t come.

The rack he’d come to dread sprang out of the chamber wall, different tools of torture shimmering from the fire.

His body felt so hot; his blood was boiling.

“Don’t worry, Mason. Tomorrow, you won’t remember any of this. Now what was it you would always say to those poor children?”

“Please, no...”

Niac flashed a dark smile, and grabbed Mason roughly by the shoulders before throwing him onto the rack of fire, metal, and penance.

“We’ll play again tomorrow.”

THE CHAINS OF RESTITUTION

By: Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

"I wear the chain I forged in life, I made it link by link, yard by yard." – Charles Dickens

Baltimore, MD

December 1989

Vadoma Boswell was the last person to enter the Cathedral where her beautiful daughter was laid out. The pain racking through her body felt as if someone had set it on fire, but even that fiery affliction paled in comparison to the unbearable agony that took hold as her daughter's white casket came into view.

She winced in misery, knowing full well the deal she'd made with *Beng* had permanently tainted her soul; Vadoma might never see her precious Kizzy again, but at least retribution would be sought against those that had harassed her daughter to such a point she had taken her own life. Inhaling deeply, her steps reflected her heavy heart as she moved towards the ornate sarcophagus. The inside was lined with crimson satin; the color would protect Kizzy from evil spirits, as would the pearls which Vadoma herself had placed in her daughter's nostrils.

Touching the dead was frowned upon, for fear of *marime'*, but Vadoma had already contaminated herself through making a deal with the devil. Approaching the casket, she tugged the sleeve of her red blouse in order to conceal a black stain spreading over her body, for fear Father Grey would take notice. The undertaker had dressed Kizzy in a fine white gown. Vadoma had purchased the dress at one of the harbor shops. Outsiders didn't like dealing with Travelers, but the young girl waiting on her had quickly changed her tune when Vadoma produced the sizeable wad of cash she'd acquired selling all of her gold.

Family and friends from far away had come to pay their respects. Her daughter deserved a proper funeral. Kizzy was not to blame. The four who drove her to suicide; they were the ones to blame. As far as Vadoma was concerned, they had taken Kizzy's life by their own hand. Thoughts of what

her daughter had written in her diary tormented Vadoma... if only she had disregarded privacy and read it sooner. Perhaps she could've prevented this.

How could Kizzy have kept this from Vadoma? Her own mother?

Her hand grasped the brass handle of the coffin for support, as everyone gathered came forth to offer condolences.

Sitting right in front of the casket during the funeral service, Vadoma's gaze never left Kizzy's lifeless form. She wanted to burn that image into her memory banks, to carry it with her into the depths of hell so that when she returned...

Unable to conceive after Kizzy was born, her husband had deserted the two of them. Travelers preferred large families. Her daughter had been all that mattered in Vadoma's world.

Father Grey stepped down from the altar, wearing typical black robes with a white collar. He locked arms with her for support as he helped her to her feet. Thankfully, it wasn't the arm already stained with darkness. Vadoma felt the point of the dagger, hidden under the striped purple scarf wrapped around the waist of her black suit. She made certain not to brush against the priest's body.

The burning sensation seemed to intensify with every passing moment. "Ahh, Madame Vadoma, my sincerest condolences for your loss. How are you doing, my dear child?"

"How am I doing?" She spat, not intending to sound so vindictive but unable to conceal her rage. "Father, my only child is dead by her own hand. How do you think I am?!" He kindly disregarded her tone, continuing to speak in a soothing voice.

"Yes, this is quite a misfortune, but God is forgiving of all things." He patted her shoulder gently. The jolt of pain his righteous touch sent shooting through her left breast, all the way down to her toes, made her weak in the knees. The blackness now residing within her protested viciously. Vadoma gritted her teeth to keep from crying out.

"This is more than a misfortune, Father Grey. The horrible wrongdoings Kizzy's tormentors inflicted on her should be harshly judged."

They would pay. They would all pay.

"It is true that the things done to Kizzy were gross transgressions, my child, but only God can be the judge." Concern was reflected in his brown eyes.

He was wrong; there was *another* who could cast a different kind of judgment.

Beng, The Devil, Lucifer...

As the casket was closed, Vadoma wailed from grief rooted deep within her blighted soul. It was unbearable; to know she would never see her dear girl again. Tears streamed down her face as other women joined her, grieving along with her, trying to offer whatever comfort they could.

It was to no avail.

The procession followed behind her slowly out of the Cathedral, and the minister, as well as a few of Vadoma's closest relatives, joined her in the limousine waiting to take them to the cemetery. She held all the emotions coursing through her inside, much like her daughter had done, as they rode in silence.

Upon reaching the gravesite, she was trembling from head to toe. Even her teeth were chattering, but it wasn't the cold wind causing it.

Vadoma reached her hands up to adjust the lavender scarf covering her head. Her daughter had loved purple, and the gauze *diklo*, pink and red roses interwoven with tiny metallic threads, had been Kizzy's favorite. Vadoma could feel the black tendrils spreading to her throat. Automatically, her hand flew to her neck to cover it. Her fingertips ran over the jewels; she had worn her daughter's best jewelry as a tribute.

The Father continued with his religious rant. "It is up to God alone to judge our sins, and only through the Lord will you find peace."

He took his place beside her coffin and began his petition for the soul of her daughter to find rest in the afterlife. Vadoma remained quiet, not wanting to disturb the words of supplication for Kizzy. However, as the Holy Father began to ask mercy for the ones that had harmed her, she was unable to contain herself anymore.

"I intend to condemn the ones that hurt her!" Vadoma exploded in a fit of fury. Four names spewed forth. "Cassidy Provance, Salina Stevenson, Diane Chambers, and David Winters; you will all feel my pain!"

Father Grey shook his head, his heavy brows creased in distress. "Seeking vengeance is not our way. Travelers in this area have worked hard to discourage misconceptions of our people. Committing such a sin would only add to the persecutions of Gypsies. I would have no choice but to have you shunned."

"Do what you must! Punishing the *doshalò* is my only concern!"

“It is not our place to determine who is guilty, Vadoma!” Father Grey warned her sternly. “Be mindful that any wrongdoing will come back threefold.”

Vadoma lowered her eyes to stare at the ground and uttered, “Of course, Father Grey. Please continue our goodbyes to my beloved daughter.” He studied her inquisitively for a moment.

“Yes, let us pay our respects.”

Tears threatened to spill once again, bereavement clouding her task. The only way to block out the hurt was to embrace the purified anger held within over the loss of her pride and joy. As if the skies were intertwined with Vadoma’s emotions, smoke colored rain clouds moved in overhead. A bolt of lightning lit up the darkened sky

Friends and family had come from far and wide to ask forgiveness for any wrong doings they’d done to Kizzy during her shortened life, as was their way, so the spirit would not come back to haunt them.

If only they knew what she had in store for Kizzy’s persecutors. The darkness spread further, seeping into her fingernails. Vadoma moved towards the purine coffin as her daughter was lowered into the ground, weaving through the crowd of Travelers as they tossed coins and roses onto Kizzy’s final resting spot. The inky tendrils were spreading further onto her skin, becoming visible; the time was nigh. She wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the dagger in her belt. The wind howled, and icy rain began pelting the gatherers.

Vadoma screamed in order to be heard over Mother Nature’s wrath. A wrath that in time would match her own.

“I condemn those who’ve taken my daughter from me!” she screeched as a bolt of lightning split apart the clouds, landing so close that a thunderous clap rang in the ears of the people gathered.

The Father gasped, “Madame no!” The crowd cringed in fear.

In her native tongue, Vadoma Boswell began cursing them, promising to cause Kizzy’s tormentors the same pain and misery she now felt. The vile, corrupt tentacles fully wrapped around Vadoma’s throat, creeping slowly onto her pale face, then, in an instant, a blackness exploded like a popped blood vessel, the markings left behind resembling a spider web.

The evil pact she’d made corrupted her very core. It began slinking into her eye sockets as she continued spewing blasphemies.

“My deal with the Devil will let me curse the families who have hurt my daughter.” Her eyeballs were now totally invaded by the blackness, with the exception of a fiery glow where the pupil should be. Vadoma glared at the Father as he stared back into the face of evil. Powerless to stop her, he fell to his knees and began praying feverishly.

He prayed to revoke the deal she’d made with *Beng*, pleading for Madame Vadoma to come to her senses before it was too late to reverse the curse. But she was too far gone; *Lucifer* had already staked claim to her soul...

Vadoma’s voice had taken on an otherworldly quality as it boomed over the harsh weather. “When their firstborn reach the age of my Kizzy, I shall return to redeem the sins of the mothers and fathers, so that they will come to know my pain!”

Vadoma’s polluted eyes were burning with the fires of Hell as she turned towards her daughter’s casket, now resting in the damp ground. She slipped the dagger out of her belt and brought its sharp blade up to her throat, making an incision on the left side. Blood dripped like crimson raindrops onto the virgin tomb. Methodically, she slid it against the length of her neck, splitting the skin apart, causing blood to gush out with such ferocity that the crowd screamed in unison, terrified as they backed away from the abhorrent display. Then Vadoma Boswell fell, like a marionette doll whose strings had been cut. She landed on top of her daughter’s pristine casket, bleeding out until it was bathed with her mother’s scarlet blood.

Father Grey didn’t know what to do except continue praying for both of them. Then, he directed the crowd away from the frightening site, distraught over what evils Vadoma’s words might bring. They quickly dispersed, and Father Grey stumbled towards the caretaker’s small residence, sitting at the bottom of the hill. He pleaded to use the phone, and then called an ambulance and the undertaker.

No one had been aware of the teenage boy hiding behind a large oak tree. He had gone along with the cheerleaders’ scheme because he liked Cassidy Provance, the head cheerleader, and wanted to impress her. He’d known she could be cruel, just like her friend’s Salina and Diane, but there was just something about Cassidy...The guilt of his misconduct lay heavy on him, it should have never gone this far.

And now, after witnessing Kizzy’s mother’s demented display, and listening as the howling wind carried her rabid words, he was also scared for

his life.

The shiver that went down David Winter's spine had nothing to do with the freezing rain; it chilled his bones and made his limbs stiff. He put his hands on his knees for support, breathing hard as bile welled up in his throat.

What if she really did come back to get him? David shook off the frigidness and ran through the woods resting behind the cemetery, sprinting to where his car was parked. As he drove home, he couldn't help looking in the rearview mirror every few seconds, hoping against hope that the scene he had just witnessed was part of some nightmare.

David was scared shitless.

What he didn't know, at the time, was that it was not his life he should fear for...

Washington, DC

January 2012

Caleb Jennings's body ached from the intense swim meet he'd just had; their coach had pushed them extra hard today, and the star athlete was beyond exhausted. Caleb was the last one to trudge back to the locker room. He reeked of chlorine and his muscles were sore, so he was looking forward to a nice hot shower.

Of course, there wasn't much he'd rather be doing than swimming. When he was in the water, that's when Caleb felt most alive. Being an excellent swimmer, he'd won several competitions, as well as working as a lifeguard during the summer months.

He was looking forward to his birthday party in the church basement; he'd turned seventeen yesterday, so they were celebrating over the weekend. Charity, the cute blonde in his Geometry class, had promised she would come...

The sound of dead weight hitting the water echoed down the hallway just before Caleb reached the showers. Although no one else appeared to have heard the loud splash.

He couldn't ignore it; someone might be in trouble.

Caleb turned around and jogged back towards the pool room, stopping abruptly at the entrance, where his skin was unexpectedly assaulted by prickly goose bumps, and the damp hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Why was he suddenly filled with an overwhelming sense of panic? So much so, in fact, that his stomach clenched into a tight knot. For an instant, he was paralyzed with fear. Intuition bells blared in his head, warning him not to go back in there.

This was silly; being afraid of a splash. One of his buddy's was probably playing a stupid birthday prank on him.

"Hey! Coach's gone! You're not allowed in there!" He shouted sternly, hoping to hear one of his smartass friends laughing over the trick Caleb had fallen for.

The only response he got was silence.

"C'mon, jerkwad, knock it off!"

Ominous looking clouds loomed in the sky above, darkening the large windows overhead. Caleb Jennings tentatively stepped inside the dim room, his bright blue eyes hastily scanning the pool for any signs of a disturbance. His gaze followed bubbles that led to the bottom of the deep end, where a shadowy figure lay motionless below.

Instinct took over, and Caleb took a deep breath right before diving into the pool, displaying perfect form as always, leaving a jetstream in his wake. Not that it mattered, there wasn't a soul around to see. It would've been pointless to call for help, no one would have heard him and precious seconds would've been wasted.

The crepuscular silhouette began to solidify as he drew nearer and the woman came into view. She appeared to be a middle-aged woman, lying face down, fully dressed in black from head to toe.

As if she had planned to go to her own funeral.

The idea that this was a suicide cut through him like a lightning bolt.

Caleb had to save her, or she'd be damned to Hell for trying to take her own life! Thankfully, he knew CPR. He would do all he could to revive her, and then talk to her about the Lord. His mother would be so proud; he'd be a hero and more importantly, it would impress Charity. Colleges were already competing for the well-rounded junior, and this would add to his impressive list of accomplishments.

Caleb processed all of this in a matter of seconds.

One arm was stretched out at her side, and Caleb noticed it was already turning an odd shade of blue. He reached out and grabbed her firmly under the armpits, ready to pull her limp body to the surface.

Her other hand, pale and gnarly, grabbed him unexpectedly, locking her fingers firmly around his wrist. Startled, he lost some air.

“Don’t freak” he warned himself, but even as the trained thought ran through his head, his heart began hammering violently against his chest wall. His lungs began to burn with the need for air as he tried to focus and swim towards the surface.

Something was wrong, very wrong. The woman’s boney hand had a vice-like grip on his wrist, her dark fingernails digging into the flesh. He began to pry her fingers open, one by one, and noticed, as he did so, that the black from her fingernails began to spread out, doing a disturbing dance on her hand and up her wrist. The red blouse and purple scarf she wore under the black suit ballooned out as he struggled towards the surface. He had to get air soon or they would both drown. Each time he pulled one finger, another closed again.

The moment Caleb truly panicked was when her head turned towards him at an unnatural angle, and her eyes popped open. They were like a gateway to Hell; black irises, complete with a raging inferno burning where the pupils should’ve been. The rest of her face was ghastly, ashen colored with hollow cheeks and sunken temples. Caleb sputtered, air bubbling in front of his face in the water. He kicked hard against the bottom, finally freeing himself.

He burst through the surface, gasping for the stale pool air. He welcomed the scent of chlorine as it filled his nostrils, and tears stung his eyes. Quickly he swam to the edge and pulled himself up. Sitting on the bumpy cement at the edge of the pool, he tried to clear his head. His mother had warned him about watching those horror movies, but he’d gone against her wishes. Had he opened some mental gateway to eternal damnation? Maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him? Could this be some elaborate hoax?

That must be it, because now, there was no body at the bottom of the pool; no trace of the woman in black.

He’d never felt, in his entire short life, the fear he now felt. How would he ever step foot inside a swimming pool again? He had just timed a

1.38 in the 200 Freestyle, putting him in the top 5 in his state, and now fear of the water consumed him.

As he began to pull one foot out of the pool, the woman's head slowly rose up with it, breaking the surface. Her gruesome face stunned him as she leered at him.

He was transfixed by those hellish eyes.

Flashes of a young girl, around his age, being held underwater for long periods of time assailed his mind. The girl was lovely, with long dark hair. A group of girls were trying to pull down the top of her bathing suit.

As they taunted and tormented her, something familiar struck him about one of these girls. To Caleb's mortification, he recognized one of the teens involved as a younger version of his own mother! Where did that come from, and what did it mean?

Her face was now stained with that black mark that seemed to be moving across her body; still she pulled on him, and her demonic voice caused cracks to form in the glass pane windows.

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

Even though it was out of context, Caleb knew his Bible verses well, and was shocked over what this demon-woman had recited. The sound was retched and vile, listening to it come out of her mouth.

He clutched at his temples, in excruciating pain. Caleb just wanted to get away, but before he could draw himself to a standing position and react to the enormity of the situation, she had her hands wrapped tightly around his ankle.

She yanked him back into the water; his hands tried to find purchase on the cement, but there was absolutely nothing he could grab onto. Flailing about madly, Caleb threw blind kicks and punches, trying to break free of this abomination that was trying to...

"No!" he cried, utterly terrorized. Breaking free of her hands, he started swimming like an Olympic athlete towards one of the ladders. If only he could grab onto one of the rungs, surely he was strong enough to get away. He was praying and sobbing, but as his hand grazed one of the metal rungs, he was yanked back like a rag doll.

He screamed as he was wrenched back into the water.

She dragged him back into the deep part, forcing him to face her. An odd, satisfied smile cracked open little cuts on her scaly face, and blood swirled around Caleb's face in the water. He felt dizzy and sick, and retched with such force that he spewed out blood, causing her to release him.

Just as his head surfaced and he frantically sucked in air, the heinous claws clasped around his ankles once again. Caleb had managed to grab onto the ladder under the diving board. He clung to it for dear life, but his water-slickened fingers slowly began to slip.

One hand lost its grip, and she watched with those horrible, evil dead eyes as the other released, and then she pulled him beneath the surface for the last time.

He would carry the image of her abominable eyes to his watery grave.

Baltimore, MD

January 2012

"Breaking news tonight at eleven." Fifteen year old Bree Winters snorted as the anchorman on the eleven 'o clock news made the announcement before the commercial break. It was the same line as every other night. Hell, a cat stuck in a tree was breaking news.

She went back to working on the book report that should've been done by now, but Bree had a bad habit of procrastinating. A more crucial development in her life was keeping her busy at the moment. She was texting the new boy at school, Jal Crystall. He was tall, dark and handsome enough.

He had that 'loner' aura that she found irresistible.

He'd told her his name, Jal, meant wanderer, when she'd tentatively asked about it. The boy was a year ahead of her, but Bree was naturally bright, and had stumbled her way into some advanced classes. He was also in her lunch period. She slid in next to him one day and struck up a conversation.

Jal seemed to like her, too, and now they sat together every day and texted each other constantly. They were trying to arrange some time together outside of school, but she was afraid to mention him to her father.

Bree's dad had never struck her as a racist or a bigot. He was super liberal and had friends of many colors and ethnicities. When she had invited an African American boy her age to her birthday party last year, and they'd held hands and danced together, her father had not even blinked. But when it came to Romanians, Travelers, or Gypsies, as some people still called them...it was frightening how much disdain he had for them.

Her dad had actually dragged her out of a Steak and Shake once because a group of Travelers were there, muttering something about curses.

Jal might dress a bit odd, but he was kind and considerate, and listened attentively to everything she had to say. He was the furthest thing from the stereotype her father had stuck in his mind.

Bree shook her head just thinking about her super intellectual father being superstitious; it didn't make sense. Nonetheless, she was certain to be met with scorn, or worse, if he knew about her Jal, the wanderer.

She wished her mom were alive. A mother would be more likely to understand, she imagined. The cruelty of having her mom taken from her during child birth left a bitter taste in her mouth.

A life for a life; poetic justice. Humph.

Dr. David Winters entered the cozy living room where a fire was blazing; beaming at his pride and joy as he sat down in the worn beige recliner he refused to part with. "Hey kiddo, how's it going?" He motioned toward her book report before opening his laptop.

All the anger she felt over her father's weird idiosyncrasies melted. He'd lost his wife, yet he loved Bree unconditionally.

Even if that love was a bit suffocating at times. She sent Jal a goodnight text from underneath her tablet and offered her father a half-hearted smile.

"About as good as that." She offered, nodding towards his laptop. She knew he was studying up on a new medical treatments.

"I haven't even started yet."

When Bree gave him that look, it reminded David so much of his late wife. Dawn. A brief melancholy washed over him. It got lonely, at times. In a few years, Bree would be going off to college, beginning a life of her own.

The breaking news report interrupted his thoughts.

“This evening, after a swimming match, Salem High School’s star swimmer apparently returned to the pool area after the meet. No one saw him again until his body was found later by the night janitor. His drowning is suspicious, though the authorities have no suspects at this time.”

“Do you think someone did it?” Bree inquired softly.

David pondered for a moment how best to answer his daughter’s question, “I’d say it looks that way. Too many screwed up, sick people in the world today.”

The news reporter droned on about what they did know, and the few details they gave were pretty gruesome. David was getting ready to change the channel when the reporter mentioned the names of the boy’s younger siblings and his parents.

Bree looked up to see her father frozen, staring open-mouthed at the television.

“Dad, what is it?” she asked, a little alarmed.

“I...I think I might have been in High School with that boy’s mother.”

Doctor Winters did a search on the laptop, and easily found the name and phone number he was looking for. His hand hovered above his cell phone for a moment before dialing Salina’s number. Just before he hit send, he changed his mind.

It had been a long time ago, in another life.

Baltimore, MD

October 2012

A bump in the road jolted Felicity Maize awake.

Where was she?

Her dazed vision slowly brought into focus the back of an ambulance. Oh, God, the accident! Her brand new convertible; a birthday present from her parents, totally demolished. Tears slid out from under her heavy eyelids. They were going to kill her. And what about Chelsea?!

“Chelsea...?” Felicity croaked past the lump in her throat, sniffing.

“There, there.” A odd voice attempted to comfort her. A cold hand was on her wrist, grasping it tightly as a needle pricked her skin. “I’m afraid your

friend perished in the fire. This will help you relax a bit. We have a long ride.”

It felt as if someone had stabbed her in the heart. Her very best friend.

Felicity wasn't even sure exactly what had happened. Had she caused the crash; had she killed her friend?

“Nooo! Nooo noo no...”

Her cries diminished as warmth spread through every fiber of her body, soothing her overwrought nerves. She closed her eyes and drifted off into dreamland.

But her dreams were far from peaceful.

She kept reliving that car crash, over and over again. Images were in fragments; fire and metal, blood running down into her eyes, being twisted at strange angles. And Chelsea...

Incessant trickling from somewhere above burrowed its way into her dazed consciousness. Drip. Drip. Drip. Felicity moaned as a dull throb emanated from her temples.

Then, suddenly, bright lights were being shined in her eyes; a light so bright it felt like it was burning her eyeballs. She jerked away.

“Ahh, you're awake now. Good.”

The comforting tone from earlier was gone, replaced by a menacing tone. It sounded almost threatening. It was hard to see; spots danced in front of her eyes from the bright light. She couldn't see clearly who was talking to her.

Pale. Yes, that much Felicity could make out. A purple scarf around her head. How odd for a paramedic.

Was she a paramedic?

The sudden wave of unease that washed over her was not calmed by the fact that she found she was secured tightly to a stretcher by two straps. Felicity lifted her head and peered out of the back window of the ambulance, trying to gain some semblance of how close they were to the hospital. She blinked several times in succession, trying to clear away those infernal spots. Her eyes wandered back to the window, and as her vision cleared, she spotted a sign on the other side of the road, I92 East. This was all wrong. They were nowhere near Cambridge Hospital.

A withered hand with an inky stain on the back, reminding Felicity of a botched tattoo, reached forward and fiddled with the source of the repetitious dripping noise. The sight of the ancient woman whom the hand

belonged to made her abdominal muscles clench tightly. She was definitely not a paramedic.

Who was driving?

Was Felicity being kidnapped?!

The ghastly woman had on a black suit that appeared to have soot all over it, as if it had been through a fire. A red blouse underneath also had the appearance of being scorched. Pure gold jewelry, with a variety of gemstones, adorned her neckline. Felicity's gaze moved up the wrinkled neck, and she noticed the blackness pulsating, as if it were a living entity.

Felicity shuddered, too afraid to look at her face. Instinct told her it would be something horrendous.

"Driver, driver, help me!" she croaked as loud as she could.

The old woman let out a cackle.

Felicity felt an anxiety attack coming on. Her chest tightened and it felt as though she couldn't breathe. She began wheezing.

"Now, we can't have that." The sinister voice informed her as a needle was jammed into her thigh. Whatever was in that syringe made Felicity feel numb, from the site of the injection, radiating outward.

As the numbing medicine began spreading through her system, Felicity's right hand brushed against her side, and she realized her cell phone was in her pocket. Carefully, she slid it out. The heinous woman's eyes were boring into her as she felt around, trying to hit redial. Her Mom's number was the last she'd called.

"Hello?" Her Mom's voice was music to her ears, and she began sobbing, wanting nothing more right now than to be enveloped in her embrace.

"Mom! Oh Mom, help me! I was in an accident and this crazy woman took me and..."

Her words were cut short as the hand with that pulsating black stain reached out and grabbed her phone from her hand. The numbing effect was spreading.

She was screaming, so the revolting hand clamped down over Felicity's mouth. It smelled putrid, like death, and vomit made its way into her mouth that she couldn't spit it out.

"Interesting. A portable phone that fits in a pocket." The entity across from her studied it a moment as Felicity began choking on her own

regurgitation. The hand released and the vomit spewed out everywhere. She was gaging and gasping for breath.

“Hello, Cassidy.”

“Who is this? Who the hell is this?!” Cassidy Provance Maize shouted. “What are you doing with my daughter?!”

“Remember the cornfield?” Felicity couldn’t help herself; her eyes traveled up the face of the she-demon that had her trapped. Her teeth were perfectly white, until the stain wandered onto a section, turning them into rotting, disgusting stumps. Before she knew it, Felicity was staring into two black orbs with burning, blazing centers. She couldn’t tear her eyes away as strange visions manifested in front of her eyes, like a scene from a movie. She barely heard the next words Vadoma Boswell said to her mother.

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

Felicity couldn’t hear her mother’s breath hitch because she was overwhelmed by the images in front of her. A good looking boy was driving a girl with black hair in an old mustang. The girl’s hair was piled high on her head, like girls wore back in the eighties. They stopped in front of a cornfield, and the boy, appearing to be slightly older than Felicity was now, and built like a high school football player, opened the door and grabbed girl’s hand, pulling her playfully out of the vehicle. She was petite and pretty; not gorgeous, but she looked radiant as the boy talked to her, leading her deep into the field. He seemed to tell her to wait a moment, and she stood perfectly still with her eyes tightly shut. There was laughter, then the sound of dry corn stalks crunching while the boy, and another girl with golden blonde hair who apparently had been hiding along the outskirts, put on a mask. Two other girls joined in as they made their way back into the field, closing in on the dark haired girl.

Tears fell from Felicity’s frozen stare as she realized the beautiful blonde was her own mother.

Felicity could sense the petite girl’s disappointment, and then could *feel* her confusion quickly turn into fear. She began running towards the road, screaming.

A shadowy figure was moving towards her. Felicity wanted to yell at her to run. Oh, God, there was the glint of a knife in one of the girl's gloved hand. She was so frightened for the girl as the poor thing ran blindly into one of her masked tormentors, and the knife slit a deep cut right beside her eye.

Felicity screamed with the girl.

Then everything went dark.

When she awoke, Felicity found herself in the same cornfield she had just seen in the vision. Thoughts that her mother had done this haunted Felicity, and memories of being cruel to some of her own less-than-popular classmates taunted her.

Feeling was slowly returning, and for a brief instance, Felicity thought this might be where it would end. She would just have to free herself of these straps and...

Vadoma Boswell turned around and began speaking to someone; Felicity prayed it was the driver and that they would rescue her. Felicity angled her head to see what this crazy lady was doing, when the evil entity suddenly stepped aside to reveal the empty shell of her dear friend Chelsea. Felicity shuddered as the girl's body crumpled in on itself like a deflated balloon.

God had she been the one driving, but she was dead?

She shrieked as Vadoma pounced, holding the sharp blade glistening ominously over Felicity's head. She blinked a few times, trying to clear away tears with the lingering foggiess, no doubt an after-effect of all the drugs. She began struggling frantically under the restraints.

The specter's hell-forged chain clanked against the metal of the stretcher as the point of the blade grazed the side of Felicity's face. In the distance, the sound of her mother's voice registered. Terrible as she felt over what her mother had done, and about things she herself had done, she still cried out for her.

"Mommy's not here," Vadoma hissed as the knife stopped at the corner of Felicity's eye.

"No...please," she pleaded, kicking and screaming.

An unearthly screech escaped from inside Vadoma Boswell as she dug the blade into the girl's eye.

Felicity's body began to seizure and she writhed in agony.

Cassidy was pleading, crying over the phone, “God, no! Not my daughter! Take me instead, Felicity where are you!?” she bawled.

“Where it started.” Vadoma proclaimed, her booming voice echoing through the darkening cornfield.

“My daughter was blinded by falsities, so shall yours be blinded by things not of this world.”

This nightmare was not going to end. Deep inside, Felicity knew this torture she was enduring was all because of her mother. Yet all Felicity could think about was being with her mom again.

It would be her last thought.

Doctor David Winters pounded on the girl’s chest, frantically trying to breathe life back into the teenager, even though he knew it was already too late.

Tears were in the older nurse’s eyes as she put her hand gently on his arm and said softly, “She’s gone, Doctor.”

David shook his head in contradiction to what he knew to be true. The girl was around his Bree’s age, and that fact preyed on his mind as he reluctantly pronounced her DOA.

God, her eyes; what kind of sick monster did this?

The other girl was DOA, too. She looked as though she’d been in a car accident and was just carelessly dumped on the side of the road. A police officer had found the teenagers near a cornfield.

The one in front of him was mutilated; her eyes gouged out. They found the round orbs sitting on top of her cell phone. David was surprised there appeared to be no sexual violation involved; not that that fact would be of much comfort to either of these families.

Thankfully, this girl had an information card inside her wallet. The nurse tried the house phone first, and got the answering machine. When she dialed the cell phone, Felicity Maize’s mother picked up on the first ring. She sounded quite agitated; apparently she already knew about the accident, but the rest...

Cassidy Maize had been nearby, and arrived at the hospital within minutes.

Disturbing thoughts began nipping at the back of his brain. David wondered...Cassidy wasn’t a very common name. The last name was

different, but of course she could've gotten married. Was it possible that she still lived nearby? Was it possible that the dead teenager could be...David felt ill, and had to swallow back bile that had risen up his esophagus.

He solemnly walked into the waiting room to greet the mother. A turbulent mixture of emotions engulfed him as his eyes rested on the woman nervously twisting the strap of her designer purse. It was none other than Cassidy Provance. Her red-rimmed eyes widened in shock when she saw him.

"David? Is it really you?" A note of disbelief was in her strained voice as she tentatively got to her feet. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, just as it had always been in high school, and she was heavily made-up.

He hugged her awkwardly. "Yes, Cassidy. I'm a doctor here at the hospital. Let's go somewhere we can talk." He kept an arm wrapped steadily across her shoulder as he directed her to a private office.

"C'mon, let's talk in here."

"She's back to kill our kids, David!" Cassidy wailed the minute they were alone in the hallway off to the side of the E.R.

Alarm bells were going off in David's head as he pulled out a chair, motioning for her to sit. A part of his subconscious knew what Cassidy was ranting about. Something he had tucked away deep inside.

Something he'd tried to bury.

Cassidy was bawling, mascara streaming down her face as she pleaded to know if her daughter was still alive. Taking a deep breath, David took a seat across the narrow table and grabbed her hand. He felt tears stinging his own eyes.

"Cassidy, I'm so sorry."

"Oh, dear God, no..." Racking sobs racked her body. "My baby...my only child! She...she was all I had..." David handed her a box of tissues, struggling to control his own emotions. He needed to try to remain professional, comforting.

"Do you need someone to call your husband?" David asked hesitantly.

She shook her head. "Divorced."

"I see. Has your ex been...notified?"

She shook her head. Her voice quivered as she asked, "Can someone from the hospital call him? The last person I want to talk to right now is him."

“Sure,” David told her, grabbing her hand tightly as her tears fell freely. “Do you want to see Felicity?”

“Yes, please,” she choked through sobs. David was considering just how to word what he was about to say next. David wondered if she had changed; and how *this* would change her. He kept seeing Bree’s face, and he hurt so badly for Cassidy. He didn’t even want to entertain the thought of how much pain he would feel over losing *his* child.

“I hope this isn’t inappropriate, Cassidy, but if you are having a service for her, I’d like to attend. My daughter’s around the same age. I’m just so sorry...”

She looked up at him, and there was something in her eyes behind the anguish she now carried. “That would mean a lot.” Taking a deep breath, she cleared her throat and handed him a business card.

David returned the gesture. “I’ll...I’ll let you know when...” A sob cut her off. David took her hand again, studying her manicured nails for a moment. The next part was going to be excruciating.

“Thank you,” he told her. Then, “I have something to tell you before you see her.”

“What did she do?” A wild look was in Cassidy’s pained eyes as she demanded. “What did Vadoma do to my baby?” After which she crumbled into hysterics.

About Vadoma Boswell speaking to her...through her daughter’s cell phone.

Essex, MD

SEPTEMBER 2013

“I don’t know why I even need to know this stupid shit.” Jaclyn Martinez grumbled as her best friend Marcie tagged along with her to the chemistry lab. It made Marcie nervous when Jaclyn gave her that look, the one that said she expected an answer. She didn’t want to say the wrong thing and fall out of the good graces of her cheerleader friend. There were certain perks when you were in the cheerleaders’ clique.

“Requirement for graduation. It sucks, I know. I’ll try to help you if Mr. Dawson leaves the room. Okay?” Marcie was only a junior, but since

Jaclyn wasn't the brightest tool in the shed, they were in a few classes together.

The cheerleader regarded her for a moment. "I'll have my phone on silent. Text me any answers I don't know. Dawson won't notice."

Marcie hoped so; she didn't want either of them to get in trouble.

Jaclyn pulled open the door of the lab and sauntered inside.

"Where's Mr. Dawson?"

A strange looking woman was sitting behind the chemistry teacher's desk.

"He had an emergency at home." The woman informed them in a hollow monotone. "I'll be giving you the exam."

"Hmphh," Marcie heard her friend mutter under her breath.

"I'm Ms. Boswell." When she spoke, it sounded odd, and it hurt Marcie's ears.

She rose and walked with labored steps towards Jaclyn, as if she were dragging heavy chains behind her. Marcie took a seat near the back of the room and readied her cell phone. The substitute placed the test on top of the lab desk where Jaclyn Martinez sat. "After you answer the questions, I'll be glad to help you with the lab part. I understand how difficult these formulas can be."

Marcie's ears really began to ache as Ms. Boswell smiled coolly. Something about the look on her face raised the hairs on the back of Marcie's neck.

After sitting back down, the substitute seemed utterly absorbed in a book she was reading, so Marcie was able to freely text Jaclyn most of the answers to the written part of the exam. The cheerleader turned and gave her a quick wink.

Maybe her popular friend would be so grateful that she would introduce Marcie to her hot younger brother, who was a linebacker on the football team?

"I'm all finished," Jaclyn announced in that sickeningly sweet voice she reserved for any adults that might be able to help make things easier for her. Marcie had heard her use it on several occasions. The teacher walked over and picked it up her paper.

Ms. Boswell glanced at it for a moment. "Very good." She told the cheerleader. Marcie tried not to make a face as the aching intensified.

Jaclyn could hardly believe it when the odd substitute sat next to her at the lab table and lit the Bunsen burner. She began showing Jaclyn different formulas on a blank sheet of paper that she pulled from that book she'd been reading. Actually, with its velvety covering the color of burgundy, it looked more like an old journal or something.

"Now, let's move on to the K's." Jaclyn noticed a slight alteration in the teacher's tone, and thought maybe the woman was tiring of her lack of knowledge, concerning the periodic table.

Not wanting her to think she was a complete idiot, Jaclyn said, "Like, potassium."

"Yes, that's right."

Marcie was listening, wide eyed. Her voice sounded... well, the best way Marcie could describe it was slithery. Her head was pounding. Shadows danced on the teacher's face from the light of the Bunsen burner, giving it a skeletal quality. Instinct alerted her that something didn't feel right, she felt nauseous.

She noticed a new text from her friend. She didn't know how she had managed to send it without being noticed.

It said, "What a stupid bitch! She's giving me all the answers ;P"

Marcie shook her head. Sometimes she really didn't know what propelled her to stay friends with Jaclyn when she could be so hateful at times.

Oh, yeah, perks...

"...KN03 and C12H22O11 will give us the desired result." Marcie stood abruptly as Jaclyn spooned sugar in the flask, which was already heating rapidly. A wet trickle ran down her ear and she tentatively felt where the sensation had taken place.

Blood. It was blood!

Her ears were bleeding. She opened her mouth to warn Jaclyn that this was all wrong, but the substitute's vile eyes froze the words in her mouth. Marcie couldn't speak, and Jaclyn seemed in a trance as Vadoma Boswell urged her to add more and more sugar. Oh, dear God...tears spilled out of Marcie's eyes, rolling down her red cheeks as she watched in horror.

Ms. Boswell spoke to Jaclyn in a creepy, ethereal tone. Marcie would never forget the evil, dark red voids where her pupils should've been.

“You stupid little girl, your wicked tongue will burn with the ashes of your lies, and your body will be purged for the sins of your mother.”

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

Jaclyn’s eyes started to redden, as if they were boiling from the inside out. She clawed at her face and tried to scream, but her tongue was burning along with the contents of the vial in front of her.

A hot wind encompassed the room in Marcie’s living nightmare, and in an instant, the teacher’s skin began melting off of her face, and the whites of her eyes turned red as blood. Smoke poured forth, surrounding this witch, or demon, or whatever the hell she was.

She spoke directly to Marcie, even as the mixture combusted into a fireball, engulfing teacher and cheerleader. The words chilled her to her very soul.

“Send Mrs. Martinez my regards; tell her the score is almost settled.” Her tongue extended and lapped at the scorched corpse, and she sucked smoke and burned victim in through her mouth like a vacuum.

It was only after they both disintegrated into the flames that Marcie was finally able to move. She could barely breathe. She knew she would never make it to the door, so she smashed her backpack against a window.

She got out just in time, before the lab exploded in a fiery inferno.

The visions after the horrible tragedy tormented her mind every time she closed her eyes. All throughout the closed-casket viewing and funeral service, Marcie wondered if she should tell Jaclyn’s mother what that vindictive specter had told her. Everyone already thought she was ‘traumatized’ from the dreadful event. What they meant was crazy.

The police had questioned her, of course. Later, Marcie had heard whisperings that the video tape of the classroom had gone blank right before the two girls had entered the classroom.

And there had been no substitute teacher waiting inside.

Tears burned at Marcie’s eyes as she watched them lower the casket, filled with only ashes, into the ground. People were wondering if Marcie had done something. She could sense it.

Marcie worked up the nerve at the repast to tell Jaclyn's mother everything, but right before she had the chance to say anything, one of the officers beat her to it. He shook Mrs. Martinez's hand and offered his condolences.

They spoke in hushed tones, but Marcie heard Jaclyn's mother questioning the policeman about that day.

"What did she say that substitute's name was?" she asked.

"Ms. Boswell."

Diane Martinez's face paled to a ghostly white as she thanked the officer. After the man walked away, her eyes met Marcie's.

Scared to death, Marcie let out a whimper and fled.

Baltimore, MD

Present Day

They had been sitting on the steps of the two story house they shared when Bree's golden retriever began freaking out, barking at thin air. The dog could sense the unseen presence.

Vadoma Boswell had arrived to collect her final restitution.

As Bree watched, she saw a look of astonishment cross her father's face, but then his expression quickly took on a sort of mournful look.

She knew he could see her.

"Dad what is it?"

Bree, on the other hand, could see nothing at first. She stared hard at the air in front of her where her father was looking, and began to notice a slight distortion. Similar to the way the air appears when it rises off of the dark, hot pavement in the summer. The difference was that this air was cold. She could feel it radiating out from the area where this ghost mother must be hovering, or whatever it was that ghosts do.

Then, as if by magic, the demon-woman appeared.

Feeling instantly terrified, she backed away slightly and slid onto the concrete blocks off to the side. It made her feel like a chicken, but as her right hand flew to the barely noticeable bulge on her belly, Bree Ann

Winters realized who she was really scared for. The knowledge brought no comfort.

“Hello, Ms. Boswell,” David said softly, stroking the dog’s fur, trying to calm him.

Bree hadn’t believed any of this crap until now, as she studied the horrendous figure; it was terrifying and intriguing all out once. The tattered clothes, the melded chains fused with her skin, the crimson, devil eyes...

“I’m here for your child.” She stated, her ashen feet scorching the concrete with every step, chains clanking along behind her. *“And you’re going to watch, just like you watched everything they did to my daughter.”*

Her voice cut like a knife into Bree’s ears, but even more so to David’s.

He panicked a little over his daughter’s discomfort. “Yes, I know why you are here. I figured it out soon after Cassidy’s daughter was killed.”

The sound that emanated from this creature who was once a woman shrieked through the air, and Bree struggled to be strong; remaining silent against the earsplitting, high pitched sound of Vadoma’s wail.

David had cautioned his daughter that he alone would have the right words, and staring now in the face of vengeance, she was entirely too frightened to dispute the point.

She was close now, too close.

Step by step she moved nearer, and tears began to form in Bree’s eyes at the thought of her baby never being born.

He continued trying to distract Vadoma. “But, Ms. Boswell, it wouldn’t be an eye for an eye. It would be two for one.” David’s eyes darted in his daughter’s direction, and she shivered as the feel of a cold presence seemed to encircle her. Bree’s skin prickled, what was he talking about?

Vadoma’s shrill voice shook the old windows behind them. *“What the hell do you mean?”*

Even though he tried to remain calm, beads of sweat at his temples, as well as his tightly clenched fists, let Bree know just how nervous he was. She was looking at her father through new eyes.

As her hand remained protectively against her abdomen, Bree realized she was now seeing him through the eyes of a parent.

David knew, from his conversation with Cassidy, that sacrificing himself would not work, so even if Bree never trusted him again, it was well

worth her life. “If you kill my daughter, you will also be taking the life of my *granddaughter*.”

How? How did her dad know she was pregnant? And carrying a girl?!

She’d been so careful, wearing baggy clothes... she even had a friend drive her to the clinic, for Planned Parenthood; he *couldn’t* know, unless, unless he had hacked her tablet!

“The irony of the situation, Mrs. Boswell. The baby’s father is one of your own kind.”

Bree kept her lips tightly sealed, fuming inside. She was ready to open her mouth, but when his eyes met his daughter’s, he implored her to remain silent.

“*You’re lying!*” Vadoma Boswell was screaming furiously now.

Bree trembled at the inhuman sight before her; she was so close, her pallid skin seemed to glow against her dark suit. The fabric looked dusty and ancient. A red blouse and print scarf billowed in the nighttime breeze as three chains dragged behind. Bree was glad her hair was tied up in a scarf, because she didn’t want to know what her head looked like underneath.

Instinctively, she knew the time to stay quiet had ended. Slowly, Bree stood to face Vadoma Boswell.

“Nooo,” she said, her voice quavering at first. “No, he’s not.” Bree lifted up her shirt to reveal the small, firm bump on her stomach.

The apparition whirled on David. “*Why should that stop me?*” Vadoma Boswell cried.

“Because, Vadoma, it will upset the balance you have sought so hard to maintain.” It was the first time Bree heard her father use the ghost’s first name. “You’re already carrying three chains. Imagine how heavy two more will be?”

It was apparent that Vadoma Boswell was having difficulty processing all this. Until David brought to the surface something even more personal, from the digital pages of Bree’s most private thoughts.

“My daughter felt terrible about what had happened to Kizzy, when I told her the whole story. I know, because I read more from her...tablet. Her digital diary.” Tears that David had kept contained began streaming down his face. “I...I knew something was wrong. I wanted to make sure...I know you wished you’d had a way of knowing beforehand.” He was crying. Bree had never seen her father cry before, and he was crying hard. She moved to

hug him as she broke down, too. They clung to each other, as he pleaded for his daughter's life.

David pulled himself together to say one last thing. His voice was strained. "Bree felt so terrible over what happened, that she wrote everything down. Including her plans to name the baby Kezia Dawn."

An ethereal wail emitted from the ghastly apparition, and, after one last look at Bree, she charged forward angrily, only to be met by an invisible barrier. Her chains protested viciously against her. She clawed at them, but beneath her the ground opened up, and Vadoma Boswell was dragged back to the depths of Hell.

EPILOGUE

Baltimore, MD

Eleven Months Later

David pulled into the gravesite where his daughter lay. Six month old Kezia Dawn was bundled up in the backseat, and Cassidy rested her hand gently over his as the Mustang's purring engine fell silent.

His heart ached for Bree, he'd lost his daughter, but gained a granddaughter.

Cassidy stuck with him through it all, helping him as he'd struggled alone with the infant. A relationship was forged in the midst of tragedy. They had started attending a local church together, both desperately seeking a way to move forward. The kindly congregation, so unlike some of the religious zealots he'd encountered, had supported them unquestioningly and without judgment. David was even considering asking her to marry him, so they could raise Kezia Dawn together. She already adored the precious little baby. And Cassidy had most definitely changed.

A single tear rolled down his cheek, and Cassidy nuzzled her head into his shoulder. They'd decided to have Bree buried near Felicity.

They'd told David that Bree had died because they couldn't stop the bleeding. Natural causes; to the doctor in him it seemed like a perfectly

reasonable explanation.

The father in him didn't feel like it was natural causes. It felt like she was taken from him.

There was a light snow falling, but it wasn't terribly cold. Cassidy got Kezia out of the car. She'd grown so attached to the beautiful baby, and now she held his precious little granddaughter protectively in her arms.

They wouldn't stay long; but this was something both he and Cassidy needed to do.

This dark chapter of their lives needed to be closed, so they could move on, so they could make a new family. He stood silently over his daughter's grave, and over Felicity's grave. Somehow, he knew this baby would be safe.

Cassidy held his hand as David thought, *it has to be over*. Vadoma got what she wanted, in the end, whether Bree's death was by her hand or not.

The universe has its rules; it is bound by symmetry, and David prayed Vadoma would forever remain bound by her chains.

About: Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd

Convinced she was destined to be an artist, Suzie Lockhart attended 'The Art Institute' of Pittsburgh after graduating high school, but the gnawing urge to write always remained with her.

She originally wanted to write romance novels, but after discovering the innate ability to tell chilling tales, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness.

When her son (Bruce) realized he had the same zest for the macabre, they teamed up. Two years later, their scary stories can be found in a variety of horror publications from Dark Moon Digest, Sirens Call, Horrified Press, Dark Lore, and an upcoming vampire story in *Diabolic Tales*. Suzie was one of the eighteen women appearing in *Mistresses of the Macabre*, released earlier this year, and is very happy to have a story she wrote with Bruce selected for an upcoming charity anthology, entitled *BLEED*, which will benefit victims of childhood cancer. Bruce was one of the men selected for

Sirens Call *Men in Horror eZine*, and Suzie recently finished in the top ten for the *Women on Writing* spring competition. In the fall of 2012, 'Team Lockhart', as Suzie and her son have been pegged by one of their publishers (Horrificated Press) delved into editing. After building a reputation as hard workers, they were asked by that same U.K. publisher to edit an entire anthology. Reading through all of the entries for *Nightmare Stalkers & Dream Walkers* has been an interesting journey to the other side of the writing industry.

Horrificated Press will also be releasing a collection of Suzie and Bruce's short stories, entitled *Adventures in Horrorland*.

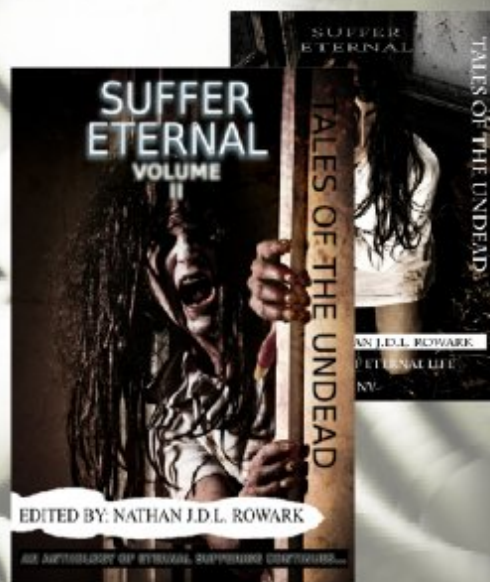
Suzie and Bruce reside in Western Pennsylvania.

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